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Queen's Award for a city student charity

Page 2

Painting Oxford's runners

Page 5

WORLD CUP BRAZIL 2014

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YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE WORLD CUP 2014

£5m pledged to start planning flood prevention scheme

DECISION DAY FOR CHANNEL

• *The scene on Botley Road, which was badly affected by flooding, earlier this year*

By **Adam Flinn**

adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

A DECISION on whether a £125m flood prevention channel will go ahead is to be made this autumn.

Leaders and residents will find out if the channel planned to divert water west of the city during floods will be built when the Chancellor's Autumn Statement is announced.

A group called the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise

· *Continued on page 3*

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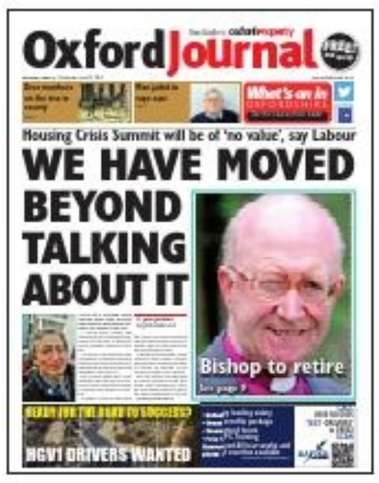
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£6m roadworks may cause jams

DRIVERS are being warned of delays as work starts on two key roundabouts in Oxford on Monday.

By **Adam Flinn**
adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

The Kennington roundabout will be turned into a 'hamburger' style roundabout while work to redevelop Hinksey Hill Interchange starts the same day.

About 60,000 vehicles use the junctions every day.

Oxfordshire County Council is spending more than £6m of City Deal funding for the project, which will also see the revamp of four bridges in the area.

Work is expected to continue until November, meaning the developments could result in traffic chaos in south Oxford in the meantime.

David Nimmo Smith, council cabinet member for transport, said the work to upgrade the roundabouts will ultimately be beneficial.

He said: "The end result will be much better than the current situation.

"All road users, residents and businesses who are currently using these roads around the south of Oxford are likely to be affected by this work.

"However, this improvement work will bring major benefits to the flow of traffic to this congested part of the city.

"By including the bridge maintenance work at the same time, we can avoid further major disruptions in the near future.

"Traffic will be able to travel through the area during the work, and businesses will be open as usual. However, drivers are advised to plan their journeys in advance to take account of delays."

The work is expected to increase road capacity by 30 per cent in the evening peak period.

At Kennington roundabout, a new carriageway for eastbound traffic will go through the central island, while the roundabout will be widened for westbound traffic heading towards the A34.

The Hinksey Hill Interchange will include a new slip-road from the Southern Bypass onto the A34, and will remove the need for traffic to stop at the lights.

The four bridges between Heyford Hill and Hinksey Hill will also be resurfaced as part of the project.

Oxford's Green Road and Heyford Hill roundabouts have already been turned into 'hamburger' roundabouts.

Queen's Award for a city student charity

A STUDENT charity **in Oxford has been awarded a Queen's Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS).**

The Oxford Hub, based in Turl Street, were one of 111 groups nationwide to be honoured for their contribution to local communities.

They were the only winners from Oxfordshire at the awards, which were set up in 2002 by the Queen to mark her Golden Jubilee.

The student volunteers run charity projects across the city.

Henry Owen, president of the Oxford Hub, said: "Us receiving this award is a message of congratulations and thanks for all the volunteers, past and present, who have volunteered with or through the Oxford Hub.

"I like volunteering, and I like it even more when I know it's effective and sustainable.

"I hope that receiving the QAVS will persuade even more students to get involved with a part of what the hub has to offer in the future."

Former broadcast journalist Martyn Lewis, committee chair for QAVS, said: "This year's winners of the QAVS have faced some tough competition.

"By being honoured in this way, they have become the latest champions of a great movement whose members play a crucial role in identifying and tackling a whole range of grass roots problems.

"They represent the very best of democracy in action."

• ***The Oxford Hub's committee members***

News Bites

Thank you for volunteers

OXFORD: Homeless charity Crisis Skylight Oxford have thanked local volunteers, who donated 1,000 hours of their time for the group last year.

The figures come during Volunteers' Week, which is running until Saturday and encourages people to offer their time to local good causes.

Tamsin Jewell, director of Crisis Skylight Oxford, said: "Volunteers across the country play a central role in giving homeless people the skills and confidence they need to get back on their feet."

Dance events coming up

OXFORD: Free outdoor dance events are taking place in the city during the summer.

Dancin' Oxford will see a performance in Florence Park, a dance show at the playground in Manzil Way, a baby boogie during the Cowley Road Carnival and a theatre piece for young children in the Oxford Castle Quarter.

Festival founder Claire Thompson said: "We hope many people come along to enjoy themselves and see free high quality dance in a range of settings."

For more details on shows, go to dancinoxford.co.uk.

Theatre time

OLD HEADINGTON: Ruskin College's season of theatre returns for June, offering introductions to contemporary theatre through speakers and rehearsed readings.

Theatre practitioners Owen Sheers and Nicolas Kent will be giving talks at the college on June 11 and 18 respectively, speaking about their careers in the industry.

And on June 25, a rehearsed reading of 'This Child' will be staged.

Further information and tickets are available by emailing the college at ruskinplatforms@ruskin.ac.uk.

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Veterans visit places they served

A LOTTERY funding project has been launched to help Oxford war veterans revisit the places they served in the Second World War.

The Heroes Return programme gives soldiers who served in the war with grants of between £165 and £8,140 to travel to Europe for commemorative visits.

Tomorrow marks the 70th anniversary of the Normandy Landings, which saw thousands of allied troops land in northern France.

Oxford East MP Andrew Smith (pictured) has supported the project.

He said: "Marking and learning the lessons from the Second World War is a duty we owe to those that helped to secure the future of our nation.

"We all have a duty to remember and reflect on both the horrendous atrocities and tremendous acts of courage that took place.

"I particularly welcome the Lottery funding being made available to veterans and their partners and carers to visit the places they served, to allow them to mark this historic occasion."

So far, more than £28m has been awarded to more than 57,000 veterans, their widows, spouses and carers for journeys in the UK, France, Germany, the Middle East, and Asia.

Millions to be invested before channel decision

• Botley Road (above) and Abingdon Road were shut for several days during the January floods

• From front page

Partnership (LEP), of Oxfordshire County Council, district councils and business leaders, banded together this year to support plans for the Western Conveyence Channel.

They have asked the Government for £50m of funding for the scheme.

This week the county council, city council and Environment Agency announced they will spend around £5m on design work over the next two years.

They are hoping the work will support the bid for funding.

Rodney Rose, deputy leader of Oxfordshire County Council, said: "I'm reasonably optimistic [of getting the funding], but it's a matter of making sure that we get the business case made up and that it succeeds.

"The only way we'd get the funding is to have the design work and business case in place, so although it's chicken and egg, if we don't do this work, we won't get the money."

When asked if the £5m could be wasted if the funding isn't secured, Cllr Rose said: "That applies to almost any other infrastructure improvement that has been done. If you don't have a design that gives you the costing, you're not going to get the money."

By **Adam Flinn**
jack@taylornewspapers.co.uk

Peter Rawcliffe, chairman of the Oxford Flood Alliance, said: "I see it not as a gamble but as an endorsement for the importance of the project, and the need to keep moving it forward.

"I think one has to be hopeful and optimistic, you can't keep waiting and doing nothing.

"Someone putting their money on the table saying 'we think this project is worth doing' will encourage other people to get involved, so I would applaud that."

Last month, the Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee agreed to give the project £12m.

If Government funding is rejected, Cllr Rose said smaller flood prevention schemes would be looked at.

Ambulance data leak

PERSONAL information of thousands of South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) employees was accidently published online, a Freedom of Information request has revealed.

The age, sexuality and religion of almost 3,000 staff members employed by the service, which covers Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Hampshire, were released.

The personal information was accidently included on a report that had been uploaded onto its website.

It showed details of staff employed in October 2013.

The breach was discovered by the Information Commissioner's Office on April 24.

A statement released by SCAS said: "An investigation is underway into the circumstances around this incident.

"We have undertaken a thorough review of all our published information on the website, and we can confirm that this was the only document affected.

"All affected individuals, including current and past members of staff, were informed of this breach in a personal letter from the chief executive officer (Will Hancock).

"We have drafted an action plan to mitigate the risk of this happening again in the future."

News Bites

Man attacked

ST ALDATE'S: Police are appealing for information after a 23-year-old man was attacked in the early hours of May 17 outside 001 Taxis in St Aldate's.

The victim was punched during an argument with three men.

One of the offenders knocked him to the floor and jumped on his back before he was able to run away.

He was taken to the John Radcliffe Hospital for treatment and has since been discharged.

Police are appealing for anyone with information to call them via the 101 number.

Thieves wanted

OSNEY: Two men on bikes who threatened a 35-year-old man and told him to hand over his possessions in Roger Dudman Way on Sunday are being sought by police.

It happened at around 1.45am.

The two men were also seen stealing bicycle parts in the area between 12am and 4am on the same day.

Anyone with information is asked to call 101.

Recycling plans

OXFORD: Electrical and battery powered items can now be recycled at the kerbside, the city council has announced.

Items that are small enough to fit into a carrier bag can be placed on the lid of a green or blue wheelie bin on collection day.

John Tanner, board member for a cleaner, greener Oxford, said: "I am thrilled that residents can now recycle electrical equipment at the doorstep."

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Revamp for two of city's post offices

TWO Blackbird Leys post offices are set to close for refurbishment this month, as part of a government programme to update branches across the UK.

The post office on Balfour Road will be shut from Tuesday to June 18, while the branch on Blackbird Leys Road will be closed from June 18 to 23.

Both will be open for more hours a week following the refurbishments, and will see services offered from a retail counter within the shops, instead of a separate screened counter.

Post Office area manager Mark Jacobs said: "We understand how important having a Post Office is to residents in Blackbird Leys.

"We are confident that the new modern Post Office service will meet the needs of the local community and secure services for the future.

"This modernisation is part of a major investment programme, the largest in the history of the Post Office, and marks a commitment to no more branch closure programmes."

More than £1.3billion has been committed by government for the Post Office network, which will see up to 8,000 branches modernised.

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Painting Oxford's runners

• *Hundreds of runners will be covered in paint for the Rainbow Run on Sunday*

MORE than 700 people are signed up to take part in Oxford's first ever Rainbow Run on Sunday, to raise money for children's and young people's hospice Helen & Douglas House.

By **Adam Flinn**

adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

Participants will be running the 3km route around University Parks dressed entirely in white, and will be showered with powdered paint throughout the course of the run.

The day will also see live entertainment from local drumming group Soul Samba, rainbow-themed artwork by the 3rd Cowley Brownies, and a giant canvas for runners to write colourful messages on.

One of the team's taking part in the run is Team Thomas, made up of 111 friends and family members of Thomas Laurie, who suffered from a rare premature ageing condition called Cockayne Syndrome.

Nine-year-old Thomas, from Bicester, visited Helen & Douglas House for respite care, but died in February this year at the hospice.

His dad Richard said: "We wanted to take part in the Rainbow Run to keep Thomas' memory alive by creating a lasting legacy in his name, and raise money for a great local charity who gave us wonderful support.

"It started as a family project and through our amazing friends and family, it has become something much bigger than we ever imagined.

"It will be lovely to get together with friends and family as well as many of the care team at Helen & Douglas House, who we got to know so well over the time we visited the hospice."

Thomas' mum Cath said: "The Rainbow Run is a perfect way for us to raise money in Thomas' name.

"Tom was such a colourful, happy and fun-loving boy and would have loved to have taken part with us. To do this in his memory, with our friends and family, is so special."

Entries for the Rainbow Run in Oxford are now sold out, although a second event is taking place in Reading on June 22.

Poppy Hanbury, Helen & Douglas House activities fundraiser, said: "We have had an amazing response to this event selling out within weeks of going on sale.

"I am sure everyone is going to have a wonderful, crazy and colourful day."

Anyone who wants to donate towards Team Thomas' efforts can do so through the hospice's website: helenanddouglas.org.uk.

News Bites

New police fund

OXON: Thames Valley's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Anthony Stansfeld has announced the launch of a fund for 2014/15 that sees money recovered by police given to local community groups.

Around £200,000 in proceeds from the sale of items that cannot be returned is expected to be collected this year.

Top marks

HEADINGTON: Oxford Brookes University has signed up to a new equality charter mark.

Under the initiative, Brookes will be working to improve the representation, progression and success of its minority ethnic staff and students.

Riding for peace

OXFORD: Cyclists riding from Glasgow to London are set to stop off at an Oxford mosque tomorrow as part of their 600-mile trip.

The cyclists are taking part in Ride4Peace, and are scheduled to arrive at Baitus Shakoor Mosque, on Cowley Road, at around 3.30pm, before their next stop in Middlesex.

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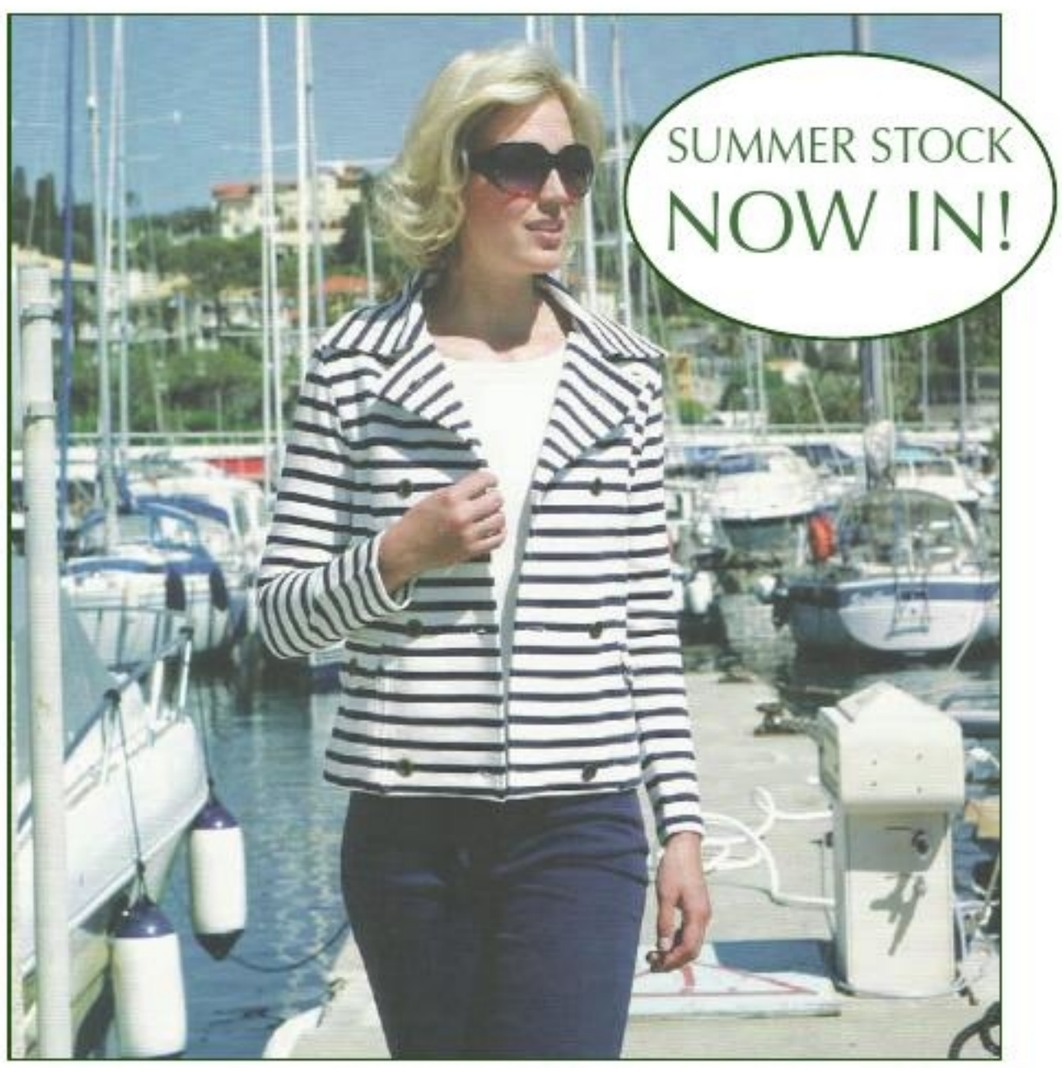

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Councillor set to lead East West Rail project

A MULTI-MILLION pound rail project to connect Oxford to Bicester, Aylesbury, Milton Keynes and Bedford will be led by the deputy leader of Oxfordshire County Council, it was announced today.

Rodney Rose, who is also the council's cabinet member for transport, has been elected chairman of the delivery board for the East West Rail project to upgrade the disused rail route to Eastern England.

Phase one of the scheme is already underway, with the announcement of the Oxford Parkway station that will be built near Water Eaton.

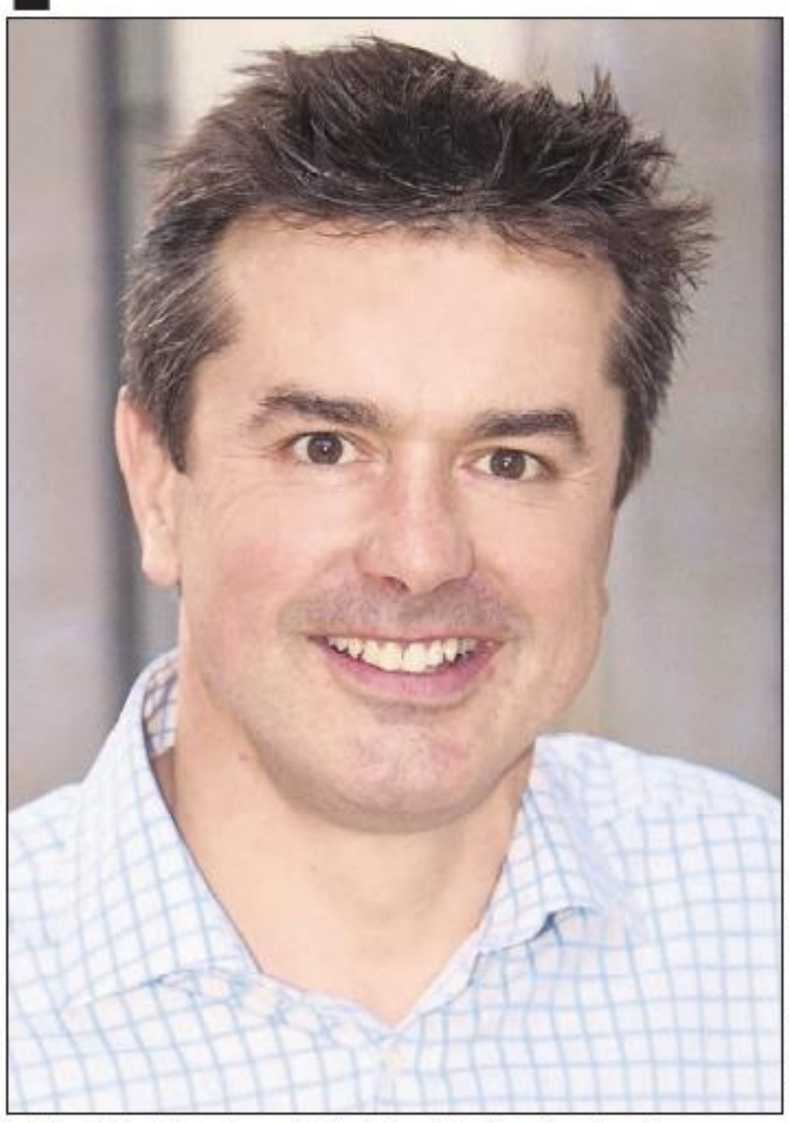
It is hoped that the railway would be open by early 2019.

Cllr Rose said: "I have been a longstanding advocate and enthusiast for this project.

"As an Oxfordshire councillor I obviously have a focus on my home area, but I will also work in harness with people from other areas to see that everybody reaps the benefits of this exciting work."

• *Rodney Rose*

Virtual advice for psoriasis sufferers



• *The telehealth scheme is the idea of Dr Jonathan Bowling*

A PILOT scheme to trial virtual hospital appointments has been launched across Oxfordshire.

Five GP surgeries including Headington's Manor Surgery are taking part in the trial which sees expert doctors give advice to a GP within 48 hours.

The trial started for patients with the skin condition psoriasis.

The 'telehealth system' means a consultant dermatologist can access patient information to review the case and offer a advice orr recommend treatment to the GP.

The computerised system is aims for a 48-hour turnaround rather than the average six-week wait for patients seeking non-urgent help from a consultant dermatologist in hospital.

The pilot runs until September.

If successful, it could be adopted in more surgeries across the county for different conditions.

It is the idea of consultant dermatologist Jonathan Bowling who previously worked in Headington's Churchill Hospital.

He said: "The pilot provides a unique bridge between GPs and hospital specialists, and it is hoped it will improve both health outcomes and quality of life for people with psoriasis.

By **Adam Flinn**

adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

"By providing a virtual hospital appointment, I'm able to bring specialist care to the patient.

"Psoriasis must be actively managed and the condition well controlled, so it is vital that people with psoriasis have regular reviews and are able to easily access specialists when they experience a flare up.

"Unfortunately this is not always the case, and patients often continue to use treatments that are not working for them because, for example, they may be unaware of alternatives, so this system really is a win-win for everyone."

Psoriasis is a skin condition characterised by red, flaky, crusty patches of skin covered with silvery scales.

At present there is no cure, and it currently affects between two and three per cent of the UK population.

Other surgeries taking part in the pilot scheme are Dr Moncrieff and Partners in Bicester, Deddington Health Centre, Morland House Surgery in Wheatley and Windrush Medical Practice in Witney.

News Bites

Green week

OXFORD: More than 50 events have been planned for the city's first Low Carbon Week, which is celebrating all things green and sustainable within Oxford.

The majority of the events will be free to the public, and a full list of activities can be found at lcoweek.org.

Help for disabled

OXFORD: A bus company has begun production on a range of 'journey assistance cards', to help people with disabilities use their services.

Oxford Bus Company has released 12 cards to cover disabilities such as deafness and visual impairment, which advise the driver on how they can help each individual person.

Operations director Phil Southall said: "These cards will help both the passengers and our drivers to make the journey as easy and comfortable as possible."

Reducing theft

BARTON: Residents were invited to a burglary awareness day on Monday, following four thefts from houses in the Barton area since May 13.

It took place at the Barton Community Association in Underhill Circus, and saw officers offer advice to the public about keeping their homes secure.

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Dozens march for divestment

MORE than 100 people marched through the city on Saturday calling for Oxford University to pull their money out of oil, coal and gas investments.

About 150 university students and Oxford residents marched from the Radcliffe Camera at 11am on Saturday to a rally at Bonn Square.

They called on the university and other local authorities and organisations to get rid of unethical stocks, bonds and investment funds as part of a student-led Fossil Free campaign.

Oxford University are staging a consultation on divestment, which ends on June 23.

Campaign coordinator James Farndon said: "The march went really well. It was great to see a broad cross-section of society coming out to call on the university to divest.

"It's an important campaign because the fossil fuel industry is driving us towards catastrophic climate change.

"The aim is for the university to withdraw its money from the fossil fuel industry, and then reinvest that into sustainable energy.

"We hope that following their consultation, the university will divest."

James Rainey, a second year biology student at Balliol College who took part in the campaign, believes divestment is needed to help the environment.

By **Adam Flinn**

adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

He said: "By investing in an industry intending to exploit five times more fossil fuel reserves than can be burned 'safely', our university is unintentionally undermining our future.

"Divestment is needed to protect the integrity of Oxford, and build political pressure to prevent the carbon budget from being exceeded."

A statement released by the university's Socially Responsible Investment Review Committee (SRIRC) said: "It is recognised that this is a complex issue which requires the collection of evidence and opinions, and time for reflection and informed debate.

"In light of the growing global debate and given the university's broad research engagement on the subject, the SRIRC has decided to canvass the opinions of the stakeholders.

"We are interested in evidence or views on whether there are alternative ways in which the university should engage in the debate about climate change."

To comment on the consultation, email fossilfuelconsultation@ox.ac.uk.

• Around 150 people marched through Oxford on Saturday

High praise for war archive project

CHANCELLOR of Germany Angela Merkel has praised a project to make digital copies of First World War-related material that began at Oxford University and spread Europe-wide.

Europeana 1914-1918 has so far put 90,000 items documenting the war on its website.

It follows the model of the university's Great War Archive which digitised more than 6,500 pieces in 2008.

Oxford University is still involved in the project helping to run family history roadshows across Europe where people share stories about life during the war.

Speaking in her weekly video podcast, Ms Merkel said: "I am happy that many people participate and that history also becomes more comprehensible."

Dr Stuart Lee, from Oxford University's English Faculty and IT Services, said: "It is wonderful to see an Oxford-initiated project now being picked up and discussed by one of the main leaders of a European country.

"More so that this is in Germany where we are witnessing possibly the first engagement by the general public with the memory of the war."

The archive has seen some interesting discoveries including two postcards written by Adolf Hitler in 1916 to his comrade Karl Lanzhammer.

To see the material or to submit items, go to europeana1914-1918.eu/en.

News Bites

Squeaky clean

SOUTH OXFORD: A shoplifter who stole four bottles of washing liquid from a shop in Abingdon Road last week is wanted by police.

At around 3.15pm on May 26, a man in his late 20s stole the bottles of Ariel washing liquid from the Tesco Express store.

He was wearing black jeans and a grey hooded top. Anyone with information about the theft is asked to call 101.

Alternatively, call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555111.

Fraud awareness

COWLEY: Police staged a fraud awareness day at Templars Square Shopping Centre yesterday, to help residents avoid falling foul of fraudsters.

Officers warned visitors of the risk of fraudsters who use courier firms to get money from victims, which in some cases has been their life savings.

Det Ch Insp Andy Bird said: "We know that the victims targeted are generally vulnerable financially, and information on crime prevention will hopefully reduce the chances of them becoming a victim."

Fun with nature

CUTTESLOWE: A day of wildlife activities forming the Oxford Festival of Nature takes place on Saturday at Cutteslowe and Sunnymead Park.

Nature trails, guided walks and a falconry display will be on offer during the day, which runs from 12noon to 4.30pm.

For more information about the event, go to bbowt.org.uk/events.

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Standard Class	£85	£43	Didcot Parkway	06:15	22:15
First Class Plus	£135	£105	Oxford	06:30	22:00
Premier Dining	£209	£179	Banbury	07:00	21:30

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Standard Class	£79	£39	Banbury	07:00	22:50
First Class Plus	£125	£95	Oxford	07:30	22:20
Premier Dining	£199	£169	Swindon	08:20	21:30

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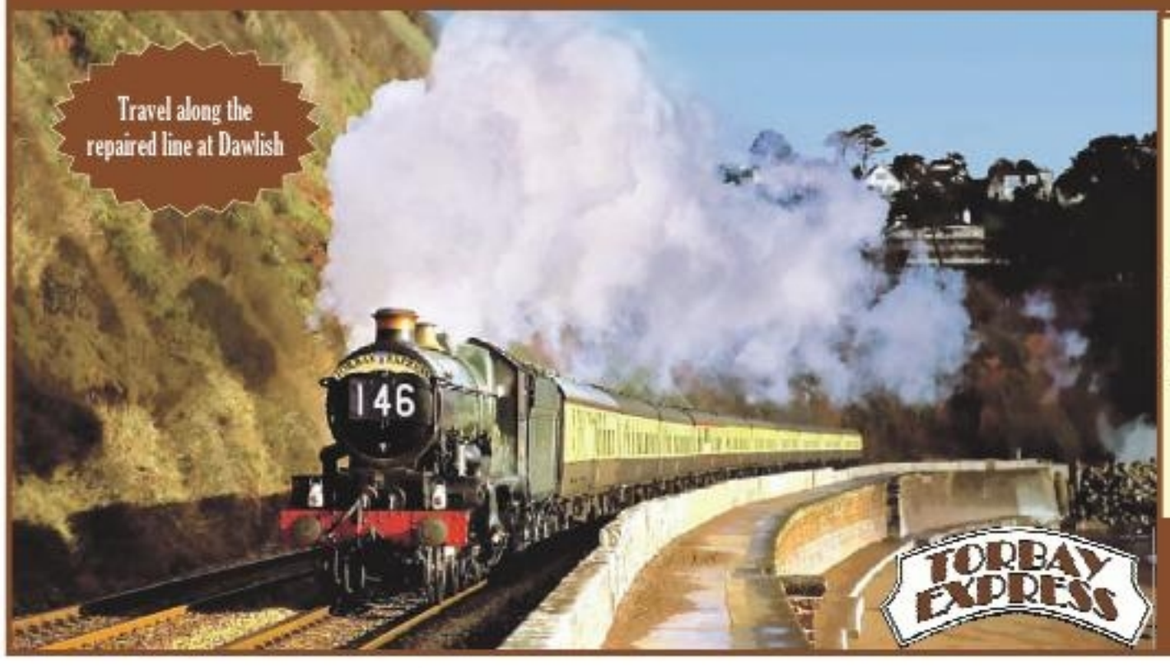

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• *The Great British Dance Off final comes to Oxford next week. See overleaf.*

Battle of the schools

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View of Othello

THE Oxford School of Drama is staging Othello: Deconstructed from Saturday, for a week of shows at the North Wall Arts Centre.

Described as a psychological thriller, Othello: Deconstructed is interwoven with a private view of the compelling story of the actors' journeys through the play.

Shows start at 7.30pm.

Fame is back

STUDENTS from Abingdon and Witney College perform the high-energy musical Fame at Oxford's Pegasus Theatre on Saturday.

Fame is known as a classic coming-of-age story, as it follows the lives of students at the New York Performing Arts Academy.

Two performances are scheduled, starting at 2.30pm and 7.30pm.

Captain's story

THE story of a US Army Air Force captain who seems trapped in a seemingly unwinnable situation is told at the Oxford Playhouse from Tuesday.

Catch-22 is based on Joseph Heller's novel of the same name, and is a powerful depiction of hope in the face of bureaucracy now, as it ever was.

Shows will run until June 14.

Students ready for Dance Off showcase

YOUNGSTERS from across the country will be descending on Oxford on Tuesday, where 50 schools will be battling it out to become champions of The Great Big Dance Off.

Five regional panels each selected the best five primary schools and five secondary schools from heats in London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Swindon and Leeds.

They will perform at Oxford's New Theatre next week, where the winning primary and secondary school will be crowned.

This is the first year that The Great Big Dance Off has been staged, and it is hoped it could become a regular thing.

Andy Steckbeck, who helped organise the competition, said: "I thought there was this gap for something about dance, and I've been playing around with the idea for quite a while.

"In my day job [as a school games organiser], with rugby, football and cricket competitions for example, it was always the same children who take part, the 'sporty kids'.

"What we're trying to do is widen the net and get more children enjoying this, and one of the few ways I found is dance, because it appeals to a completely different group of children."

Dean Stewart, general manager of the New Theatre, said: "We are delighted to be hosting the grand final,

By **Adam Flinn**
adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

and look forward to welcoming schools from around the country to Oxford.

"It will be a big night for them and by stepping out on our stage, they will be following in the footsteps of some of the greats.

"The Great Big Dance Off is a fantastic competition, giving youngsters a chance to show off their talents, and the standard of the performances is going to be incredibly high.

"It will be a great night for everyone."

Shows are at 3pm and 6.30pm. More details can be found at newtheatreoxford.org.uk.

• Children from across the UK are taking part in The Great Big Dance Off finals in Oxford next week (Picture by Nickie Hughes)

OxfordJournal

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Thriller Live	7:30pm	£65	£89.95	26 Sept 14
We Will Rock You	7:30pm	£66.25	£99.95	04 Apr 14
Billy Elliot	7:30pm	£68.50	£109.95	12 Dec 14
I Can't Sing	7:30pm	£65	£109.95	24 Oct 14
Once	7:30pm	£69.50	£109.95	30 May 14
Phantom of the Opera	7:30pm	£65	£109.95	24 Oct 14
The Lion King	7:30pm	£65	£109.95	26 Sept 14
Mamma Mia!	7:45pm	£64	£109.95	24 Oct 14
War Horse	7:30pm	£62.50	£109.95	12 Dec 14
Wicked	7:30pm	£65	£139.95	31 Oct 14
Charlie & The Chocolate Factory	7:30pm	£67.50	£109.95	31 Oct 14
From Here to Eternity	7:30pm	£67.50	£109.95	11 Apr 14

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Rocking with the Carpets

ALTERNATIVE rock group Inspiral Carpets, who are preparing to release their first studio album in 20 years in the autumn, come to Oxford's O2 Academy next Friday.

The group was formed in 1983 in Oldham by Graham Lambert and Stephen Holt, who remain with the band today.

Their last album 'Devil Hopping' was released in 1994, reaching number 10 in the UK Albums Chart, prior to the band's split the following year.

Inspiral Carpets reformed in 2003 and continued to tour over the next 10 years, but are gearing up for their eponymous new album, which is expected to be released in September.

Drummer Craig Gill said: "We have been busy writing and recording our new LP, which has been a very enjoyable process.

"We are now looking forward to getting out there this summer, and bedding a couple of those tracks into our classic live set."

Guitarist Graham said: "After a period of writing and recording our new album, it will be great to get back out playing gigs again."

Martyn Walsh, who plays bass, added: "We're really excited about playing live this summer with a new album to promote and classic songs to fit into what will be the set of the summer."

Most of the tracks for the new album have been recorded, with the band finishing it off in the coming weeks.

Inspiral Carpets are also releasing their 1989 demo tape 'Dung 4' for the first time on CD and vinyl, with tracks from that set to be performed in Oxford as well.

Doors open for next Friday's show at 7pm. For more details about the gig, go to o2academyoxford.co.uk.

• Inspiral Carpets will perform in Oxford next week

Tai Chi tales

IMMORTAL Chi, created by the team behing the renowned production 'Shaolin Warriors', comes to Oxford's New Theatre on Saturday.

The show is based on a brand new fusion of Chinese martial arts, and tells the story of a Tai Chi master and his challenge to regain his secret inner energy.

It begins at 7.30pm.

Mike's in town

MUSICIAN Mike McGear McCartney is back on the road with his first show for several years, coming to Didcot's Cornerstone Theatre on Saturday.

Mike, known for being the younger brother of Sir Paul McCartney as well as a musician and photographer in his own right, is set to tell the numerous stories he has from his extensive career.

The show starts at 8pm.

The life of Julie

THE songs of Julie Andrews, as well as anecdotes about the renowned star's life, are sung and told at Henley's Kenton Theatre tomorrow.

Julie Madly Deeply is performed by award-winning singer Sarah-Louise Young, and documents Julie's beginnings as a child star to the recent challenge of losing her famous singing voice.

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"Liadov: Baba-Yaga; The Enchanted Lake; Kikimora
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Bernstein: Candide - Glitter and be Gay (Yukiko Ishida)
Rimsky Korsakov: Scheherazade
We welcome back our coloratura soprano soloist Dr Yukiko Ishida from Philadelphia USA to perform Reinhold Gliere's tuneful and unjustly neglected Concerto for Coloratura Soprano. The concert begins with three symphonic poems by the unjustly neglected Liadov who died 100 years ago, and ends with the magnificent Scheherazade.
07517487553 SalesStGilesOrchestra@gmail.com

17 Jun 2014, 6pm - 9pm
Fairacres, Marcham Road, Abingdon
MIELE SEASONAL SEAFOOD COOKERY COURSE
: Miele are joining forces with Michelin starred chef Ryan Simpson, to teach a group of passionateamateur chefs the the latest techniques in preparing and cooking seafood. As well as learning top tips from Ryan, guests will learn from the demo, how to cook two delicious seafood recipes, as well as being able to taste them afterwards! Drinks and canapés will be included in ticket prices. £35 per ticket
01235 233 171

17 Jun 2014 - 21 Jun 2014
Oxford Playhouse
DEALER'S CHOICE
Patrick Marber's award-winning dark comedy about the gritty world ofamateur poker.
www.oxfordplayhouse.com

20 Jun 2014, 8pm - 10pm
Jacqueline du Pré Music Building
CAVALERI QUARTET
Winners of Chamber Music Residency at Oxford University give recital at JdP.
www.st-hildas.ox.ac.uk/jdp 01865 286660

20 Jun 2014 - 22 Jun 2014
Hill End Outdoor Centre
TANDEM FESTIVAL
Variety of folk, jazz, afro-beat, gypsy, and experimental music
www.tandemfestival.com

21 Jun 2014 - 21 Jun 2014, 10am - 2am
City of Oxford College
OPEN EVENT
"City of Oxford College Campus Open event
Saturday 21st June, 10am-2pm
http://www.cityofoxford.ac.uk/city-of-Oxford-College-contact-details
For more deatils contact - 01865 550550"
lucy.baker@activatelearning.ac.uk

21 Jun 2014 - 21 Jun 2014, 10am - 23 Jun 2014 - 27 Jun 2014, 10am - 1pm
MS Therapy Centre (Oxfordshire) Ltd
OPEN WEEK
"Come and see what the Multiple Sclerosis Therapy Centre offers. During the week:
Monday - NHS Physios, MS Nurse
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Thursday - Oxfordshire Carers, MS Society
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01235832023 www.omstc.org

24 Jun 2014, 7:30pm
Burton Taylor Studio
TWINS
Jack Barry and Annie McGrath are a unique young double act whose curious sketches are filled with flights of fancy and offbeat charm. Catch this preview of their delightfully deadpan sketch comedy show.
www.oxfordplayhouse.com

27 Jun 2014 - 28 Jun 2014, 7:30pm
Burton Taylor Studio
SEE WHAT I SEE
A bold dissection of the notion of sanity within Shakespeare. Eyestrings presents striking new interpretations of classic texts. Age guideline: 14+
www.oxfordplayhouse.com

28 Jun 2014, 7pm - 9pm
The Methodist Church, High Street, Witney
JOSEPH AND THEAMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT

Thursday 5 June
Unicarn Theatre, Abingdon
BANBURY CROSS PLAYERS

-AMATEUR YOUTH PRODUCTION
A lively concert performance of the songs from this popular family musical, sung by the children of Songscope - Witney Young Singers. Interpreted in sign language by Dr Paul Whittaker OBE, founder of the charity Music and the Deaf.
07786 630164 www.songscope.org

28 Jun 2014, 8:20pm - 11pm
The Wheatsheaf High St Oxford
GAPPY TOOTH INDUSTRIES
"20.45 The August List
21.30 Blunderbuster
22.15 Don't Go Plastic
£4.50 on the door, cheaper at www.wegottickets.com/event/271430"
www.gappytooth.com

28 Jun 2014, 12:30pm
Kingham Primary School, west Oxfordshire
SUMMER FETE & PRIZE DRAW
"Morgan Motor Company has donated a Morgan Supersports Junior Pedal Car (worth £3000) as a prize for the school's raffle!!"

29 Jun 2014, 10am - 4pm
Waterperry Gardens, Nr Wheatley
RARE PLANT FAIR
The chance to browse stalls manned by expert nurserymen and women specialising in both rare and traditional plants. The event costs £6.50 which includes entrance to the ornamental gardens.
www.waterperrygardens.co.uk 01844 339226

29 Jun 2014, 12pm - 3pm
Combe Playing Fields
COMBE SUMMER FETE
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Dog show, traditional stalls, face painting, bouncy castle, BBQ and bar, tea & home made cakes and so much more!"
Facebook: Friends of Combe School

1 Jul 2014, 7:45pm - 9:15pm
Old School Room, St Peter's, First Turn, Wolvercote. OX2 8AQ
ANHSO - OCEAN CIRCULATION AND CLIMATE - DR RENSKE GELDERLOOS
"The ocean plays a very important role in the Earth's climate system through storage and transport of heat, fresh water, and carbon. Dr Gelderloos will discuss the principle ocean circulation patterns and how they affect well known climatic phenomena such as El Niño and the hydrological cycle. Furthermore, as increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere affect the circulation in the ocean, this will feed back onto the climate system. Based on what we know about how the oceans affect the Earth's climate, what changes may we expect? Dr Gelderloos is a physical oceanographer interested in subpolar and polar oceans. After specializing in fluid dynamics during a BSc and MSc in Civil Engineering at the University of Twente (Netherlands), she studied deep water formation in the Labrador Sea at KNMI/University of Utrecht for her PhD. She now work as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Department of Earth Sciences, studying ocean dynamics in the Canadian Arctic."
publicity@anhso.org.uk http://www.anhso.org.uk/

1 Jul 2014 - 3 Jul 2014, 9pm
Burton Taylor Studio
A QUARTET OF CHEKHOV FARCES
Join MCS for a romp through Chekhov's lighter side, as they present four of his popular farces in a fast-paced evening of refined absurdity, Russian style.
www.oxfordplayhouse.com

4 Jul 2014, 7:30pm
Burton Taylor Studio
ESSEX LION
Ever seen a lion? In the wild? Step into Luke's world of romping satirical verse where posh plumbers, paunchy ex-rockers and Lovejoy roam free. Get ready to roar.
www.oxfordplayhouse.com

5 Jul 2014
Burton Taylor Studio
JACK AND THE BEANSTALK
"Times: 11am & 2pm
As Jack sells his cow for five magic beans and finds himself in the land above the clouds, expect lots of surprises, a gripping story and beautiful images. Age guideline: 3+"
www.oxfordplayhouse.com

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Oxford Property

www.oxfordpropertyweekly.co.uk

Thursday, June 5 - Wednesday, June 11, 2014

Lytton Road, Florence Park, Oxford, OX4 3NY. Guide price: £305,000 Freehold. This end terraced three-bedroom property is located on Florence Park. Character features throughout. Shared driveway and garage. Contact Connells on 01865 748448, or email cowley@connells.co.uk.

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Windmill Road £480,000

Victorian semi detached property in Central Headington with good public transport links and access to Nuffield and Churchill hospital. Energy Rating: E.

Pickett Avenue £315,000

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Rutten Lane £375,000

Detached Chalet Bungalow in historic village of Yarnton. Set back from the main street the property offers great access to local amenities.

Cranley Road £240,000

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Queens Avenue £275,000

Three bedroom family home with large rear garden and parking to the front, offered with no onward chain.

Merewood Avenue £425,000

Situated in Sandhills this property is deceptively large this extended semi detached property is ideal for larger families and investors alike. Offered with no onward chain or tenants in situ.

Littleworth Park £65,000

Generous one bedroom park home with parking and gardens. Altered from the original two bedrooms the space has been reconfigured to offer a spacious bathroom and fitted wardrobes to master bedroom.

Aldbarton Drive £250,000

The property comprises of living space over four floors, consisting of: Three Bedrooms, Modern Kitchen/Diner, Cloakroom & Spacious Lounge and is presented in excellent order throughout.

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Hengrove Close £230,000

Situated in a quiet cul-de-sac, this property is a great family home, offering: lounge, kitchen/diner, three well proportioned bedrooms, bathroom, parking & front & rear gardens.

Headley Way £450,000

Located within walking distance of the John Radcliffe hospital. This property has an H.M.O license for four people and would be ideal for a family and investors alike.

Collinwood Road £325,000

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Merewood Avenue £470,000

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Cowley — £1,250

IDEAL FAMILY HOME- Located in the very popular and highly sought after village of Littlemore,this delightful three bedroom semi detached property is offered in excellent condition throughout.View now to avoid missing out. EPC Rating:D

Thame — £875

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Cowley — £1,250

UNDERGOING REFURBISHMENT- this conveniently located house. Accommodation of,entrance hall, lounge/diner,kitchen,three bedrooms,bathroom front and rear gardens.Available end of June.EPC Rating:E

Cowley — £1,300

WELL LOCATED and spacious semi detached home with entrance hall, living room dining room,brand new fully fitted kitchen,2 double bedrooms good sized single bedroom, bathroom,good sized garden and off street parking.EPC Rating:D

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WORLD CUP BRAZIL 2014

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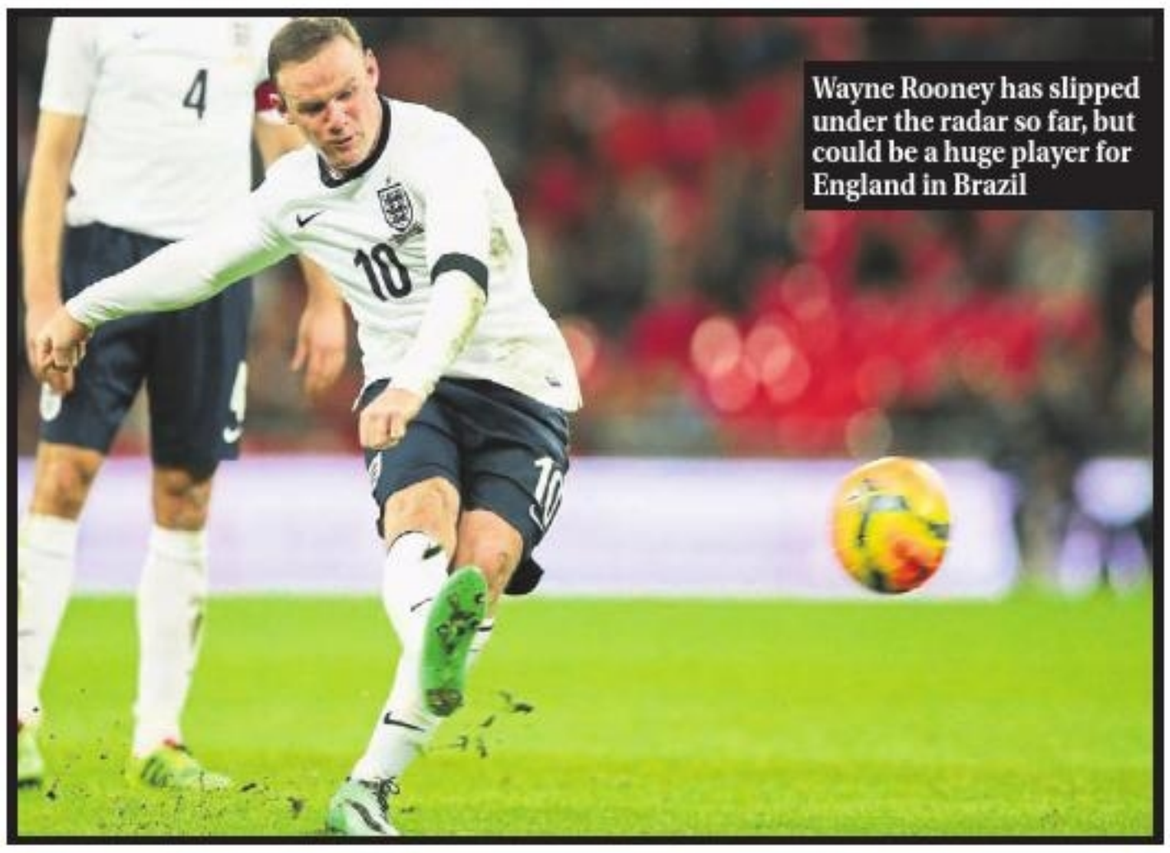
Wayne Rooney has slipped under the radar so far, but could be a huge player for England in Brazil

By Andrew McDermott

THE build-up to England's 2014 World Cup campaign certainly feels very different to previous tournaments.

Gone is the hype and pressure which has burdened previous squads. No longer does the nation expect a repeat of 1966; this time around there has been little discussion of what could lie in store should England reach the second round.

A tough group, containing World Cup heavyweights Italy and the attacking threat of Luis Suarez and his Uruguay team-mates, means there has arguably never been so little expected of an England team.

Instead, Brazil 2014 feels like a fresh start for the Three Lions. Gone – with the exception of Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard – are the so-called 'golden generation' which turned out to be no better than those that had gone before.

The aforementioned duo add valuable experience to the squad, but it is the untried youngsters that have raised excitement levels.

It remains to be seen whether this World Cup is too soon for the likes of Ross Barkley, Luke Shaw and Raheem Sterling, but the fact that nine of the 20 outfield players selected by Roy Hodgson have 10 caps or less means they do not possess the scars of previous failures.

Success at Euro 2016 or the next World Cup seems a more realistic target, but Hodgson denies that Brazil is being used as a stepping stone along that path.

"We're not thinking about that, to be frank," he said. "The next World Cup is a long way off and this tournament means everything to us.

"Our focus is very much on this tournament and I refute any claims that some of these players have been selected because of 2016. They are selected because of 2014. I think they can do well but, of course, if when we're analysing what we got out of the tournament one of the things was that some of the players have grown up a little bit, got a bit more experience, then it will stand them in good stead for the future." In truth, the form and fitness of the players at his disposal meant Hodgson had little choice but to go with such a youthful squad. While Ashley Cole struggled to get regular football at Chelsea this season, 18-year-old Shaw was voted as the best left-back in the Premier League for his performances at Southampton, forcing Hodgson's hand. "It was a decision I had to take," conceded Hodgson after a selection call which resulted in Cole retiring from international football.

"Circumstances will prove whether the decision to take the younger player is the right one or not."

But even in the worst-case scenario of an early England exit, many will believe Hodgson at least got his squad selection right and hope that any lessons learnt in Brazil will pay dividends in the future.

For England to really make an impact this summer, Hodgson must also prove he can get his team selection and tactics right. That means getting his Liverpool contingent to reproduce the form which saw them go so close to winning the Premier League and, perhaps more importantly, getting the best out of Wayne Rooney.

The Manchester United striker has barely been mentioned in the build-up to this World Cup, in contrast to the past two tournaments when he has carried the hopes of a nation.

It is a decade since he lit up Euro 2004 as an 18-year-old and having failed to score in eight previous World Cup appearances, this could be his time to shine on the biggest stage of all.

"We have nothing to fear with Wayne," said Hodgson. "His attitude is spot on. His desire could not be better.

"Has he got the ability? Yes, he has, so it is just a case of bring on the matches and on that particular day Wayne Rooney can find the form that makes him who he is."

Having nothing to fear could be the key to this youthful England squad ending the years of hurt.

You win nothing with kids apparently. And while nobody is expecting England to win the World Cup, this squad will at least hope to return with their heads held high.

ENGLAND'S POSSIBLE STARTING XI

Roof gets go-ahead

BRAZIL 2014 organisers insist an incomplete roof at Sao Paulo's Itaquerao Stadium will not affect it hosting matches.

Constructors have admitted they will not finish the intended design until after the tournament, but the event's local organising committee have stressed this will not be a problem.

The Itaquerao Stadium will host the opening match between Brazil and Croatia on June 12 before England face Uruguay there a week later.

The local organising committee said: "The only aspect which will be unfinished is the inner liner, not impacting the protection of the stands."

Ribery's swansong

FRANCE winger Franck Ribery says this World Cup will be his last.

The 31-year-old, who also appeared for Les Bleus in the 2006 and 2010 tournaments, has set his sights on a winning farewell to the event.

"It will be my last World Cup," said Ribery.

"We have to go there to achieve something, to try to win the World Cup, quite simply."

However, the Bayern Munich star has announced no plans to retire from international football and is expected to be available for Euro 2016, which France will host.

Frank is go-to guy

ROY HODGSON has announced that midfielder Frank Lampard will be England's vice-captain at the World Cup.

The 35-year-old Chelsea star, who has been named captain six times, was skipper when England were last in Brazil a year ago.

"Frank Lampard is vice-captain," said Hodgson. "I have always thought that he was going to be a key member of this 23 because of his experience and what he brings to the team apart from footballing ability.

"He brings a lot of other things to us in terms of his leadership qualities and characteristics."

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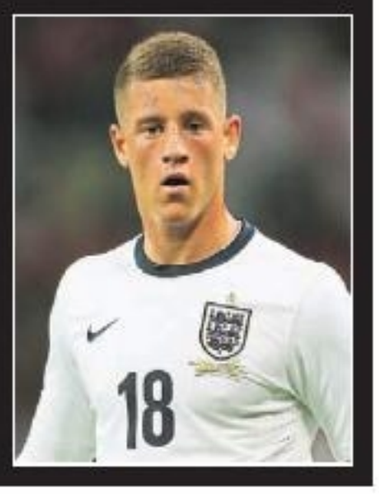

ABOVE: Adam Lallana has emerged as a real talent at Southampton this season

LEFT: Daniel Sturridge shows his goalscoring instinct in the recent friendly against Denmark

RIGHT: Ross Barkley has drawn comparisons with Paul Gascoigne

Young Lions are not quite ready to roar

ENGLAND winning the World Cup in Brazil would be a staggering success, wouldn't it? I think, though, we all know that is highly unlikely and, going into the tournament, all of our expectations are reasonable.

Saying that, I think we look in a much better place than six months ago with the emergence of so many young players with lots of talent.

These guys have shown in the Premier League that they can keep the ball well, which is the kind of football you need to play in a country like Brazil.

Let's be realistic – no European team has ever won the World Cup in South America and it will be very difficult for an England side who plays like we do to actually win it. If we get to the quarter-finals then that would be a pretty good effort, and anything beyond that would be punching above our weight.

I believe England are a side very much in transition from the so-called 'Golden Generation', with most of those either finished or coming to the end of their career, and a group who have not reached their prime yet.

So we have got to be realistic and sensible. This World Cup will be about nurturing young talent, letting them off the leash and telling them to go for it and enjoy it without putting too much pressure on.

What Roy Hodgson will have with this England squad is a group of genuinely exciting young players, we have seen them nurtured brilliantly at clubs like Liverpool and Southampton.

These players are ones who are not stained by previous World Cups – they are not scarred by losing a penalty shootout!

That could prove a big advantage, and that energy they will bring to the group could be very important.

People will, of course, argue these guys do not have enough experience: but you are either an international footballer or you are not.

We have guys like Adam Lallana, who is not actually that young, but has emerged recently in an excellent Southampton side, and Raheem Sterling, who is a breathtaking footballer. Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers says he is the best young talent in Europe, and I do not think he was exaggerating as he is certainly right up there.

Then you have his Anfield team-mate Daniel Sturridge, who has come on as a proven goalscorer, and has got that degree of arrogance which you absolutely need to score goals in that position.

Another player to have come on beautifully under Rodgers at Liverpool is Jordan Henderson. He is someone who has a great engine which will be vitally important, and technically he can play.

Then you have Everton's Ross Barkley, and for me he is a massive talent. Like Sterling, he can go past people and helps give England those things which we have been lacking.

Age is not the slightest bit important if you are good enough, because within that squad you have got a couple of wise old heads around – like captain Steven Gerrard for one.

I really feel Barkley could emerge as a potential star of the tournament, and I can see certain things in his game like Paul Gascoigne. He is incredibly strong, and I think has got a similar stature to Gazza, with that ability to score amazing goals.

I guess on the defensive side, yes, he is probably lacking in terms of tactical nous. But if you play him in a certain position then that wouldn't necessarily be that important.

So while I am not going to say Barkley is 'the next Gazza', I think there are two or three who could impress on the big stage as Gazza did for us at Italia 90. As I have already said, Sterling is a phenomenal talent and has shown consistency to play in a number of positions, which is incredible for one so inexperienced.

> "This World Cup will be about letting them off the leash and telling them to go for it"

Lallana is another who is a beautiful footballer. He lacks a slight bit of pace, but he is wonderfully gifted with both feet and keeps the ball so well which is so important.

I touched on Sturridge already, whom I think could comfortably emerge and become a star of this World Cup.

But, just like for us in Italy all those years ago, things have to come together.

Things you don't find out until the tournament is whether these guys can cope with the pressures of playing against the world's greatest players, or with the unbelievable microscope which is on you, especially from your own country, even if the expectation this year is not what it has been.

A lot of our young players have not been able to cope with all that in the past, but this group seem to be coping admirably for their clubs in the Premier League, so let's find out.

Just what team Roy will put out against Italy in Manaus remains to be seen, but while that opening fixture of a World Cup is of course important, history tells us you can do reasonably well without winning your first game. I should know, because in Mexico 1986 we lost our first game to Portugal!

So while it is not a must-win fixture to go through, losing it would make it very difficult to qualify out of what is always going to be a tight group.

■ *Gary Lineker was talking to Jim van Wijk*

BBC Lineker will lead the BBC's TV coverage of the finals and will be joined by Rio Ferdinand, Thierry Henry and Clarence Seedorf

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FOCUS
How England qualified

Moldova 0 England 5 (7 September 2012)
England launched their qualifying campaign with a five-star performance in Moldova, recording their biggest away win since 1993. Frank Lampard's double was complemented by efforts from Jermain Defoe, James Milner and Leighton Baines.

England 1 Ukraine 1 (11 September 2012)
Skipper Steven Gerrard was sent off as Lampard's 86th-minute penalty spared England's blushes at Wembley. The Liverpool captain was red-carded two minutes from the end of a poor display from Roy Hodgson's men, who were saved when Yevhen Khacherdi blocked Danny Welbeck's flick with an arm, allowing Lampard to drive home from the spot.

England 5 San Marino 0 (12 October 2012)
Wayne Rooney scored twice, taking him to 31 international goals, one more than Alan Shearer, Nat Lofthouse and Tom Finney. Manchester United team-mate Welbeck also scored twice before Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, left, became England's fourth youngest scorer, behind Rooney, Michael Owen and Tommy Lawton.

Poland 1 England 1 (17 October 2012)
After a waterlogged pitch caused the original game to be postponed, the match went ahead 20 hours late in Warsaw. England were well below their best, but managed to cling on to a precious point, with Rooney's first-half goal cancelled out by a Kamil Glik header.

San Marino 0 England 8 (22 March 2013)
Hodgson's men recorded their biggest win since 1987, with Defoe netting twice to head a lengthy list of scorers that also included Lampard, Rooney and substitute Daniel Sturridge.

Montenegro 1 England 1 (26 March 2013)
England survived a second-half battering to snatch a precious point against leaders Montenegro in Podgorica. They deserved their lead through Rooney's 35th goal for his country, but the hosts were transformed in the second half and equalised through substitute Dejan Damjanovic.

England 4 Moldova 0 (6 September 2013)
Hodgson was left raging despite England going top of Group H as a yellow card for two-goal hero Welbeck ruled him out of the crucial qualifier in Ukraine. The Manchester United man was booked for protesting against a tight line-call against him on a night in which Rickie Lambert and Gerrard also scored.

Ukraine 0 England 0 (10 September 2013)
England took a small step towards qualification after they scraped a draw in Kiev thanks to Ukraine's profligacy. Amid a booming atmosphere inside the Olympic Stadium, the hosts launched attack after attack, but they could not find their way past Joe Hart.

England 4 Montenegro 1 (11 October 2013)
Hodgson gambled on giving Andros Townsend, left, his debut and he did not disappoint, as he put the seal on the win with a 25-yard goal which flew in via a post. Branko Boskovic scored an own-goal, Sturridge converted a penalty and Rooney was also on the scoresheet while Damjanovic notched for the visitors.

England 2 Poland 0 (15 October 2013)
England booked their ticket to Rio after edging past Poland in a nail-biting and thrilling encounter at Wembley. The 18,000 Poland fans made it feel like anything but a home game, and England huffed and puffed but could not find a way past Wojciech Szczesny until the 41st minute, when Rooney finally broke the deadlock. England supporters were left to bite their nails for most of the second half, but captain Gerrard made sure of the win two minutes from time.

All on Neymar to rekindle the spirit of 1970

Above: Pele after Brazil's 1970 final win over Italy

Left: Much is expected of Neymar

Right: A nightmare scenario would see Lionel Messi lift the World Cup in Rio

By Mark Staniforth

FROM samba stars to sunshine football, whole shanty-towns of cliches have clung to the 2014 World Cup finals since it was confirmed the competition would return to Brazil after 64 years.

Five-time winners they may be, but there is only one group of players that has truly come to symbolise the majesty of the Selecao. And once Brazil got the nod for 2014, evocations of the unforgettable 1970 squad were not short in coming: the goalscoring exploits of Jairzinho; the angled drives of Carlos Alberto; the flawless magic of Pele, who bestrode the successful bid like Christ the Redeemer itself.

Football folk around the globe revelled in visions of the ultimate football experience, a 32-team finals stretching from the shores of the Copacabana to the Amazon jungle; a month-long feast of round-the-clock sunny-side-up football.

But no sooner had the FIFA carnival hitched up and left town, taking their "sun, sand and soccer" soundbites with them, such idealised visions were quickly replaced by the harsh reality of the physical and economic costs of hosting the games.

Violent clashes marred Brazil's hosting of the Confederations Cup in July last year and protests of various sizes have persisted across the host cities, while building delays have at times left the suitability of various venues in serious doubt.

It was hardly the kind of vision that the cliche-mongers had in mind, and for all the Brazilians' undoubted ability to put on a party, it has created the kind of societal fissures which are unlikely to be plastered over in time for the big kick-off in Sao Paolo on June 12.

Nevertheless, one senses that the decades of unrivalled glory Brazil has brought to the global game has created a situation where the world is

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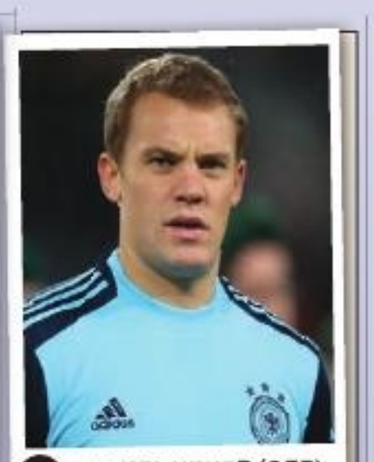
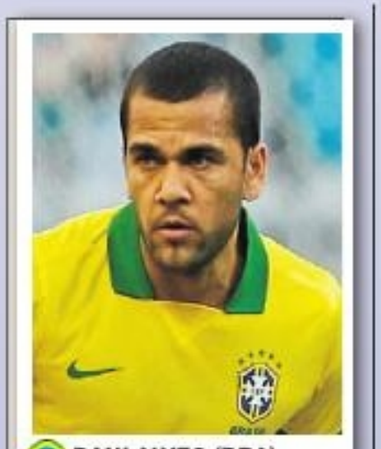
WORLD XI



MANUEL NEUER (GER)

Club: Bayern Munich
Age: 28 Caps: 45



DANI ALVES (BRA)

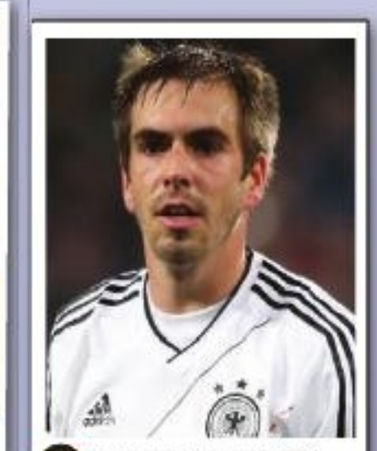
Club: Barcelona
Age: 31 Caps/Gls: 72/5

GIORGIO CHIELLINI (ITA)

Club: Juventus
Age: 29 Caps/Gls: 67/4

THIAGO SILVA (BRA)

Club: Paris St Germain
Age: 29 Caps/Gls: 45/2



PHILIPP LAHM (GER)

Club: Bayern Munich
Age: 30 Caps/Gls: 105/5

ANDREA PIRLO (ITA)

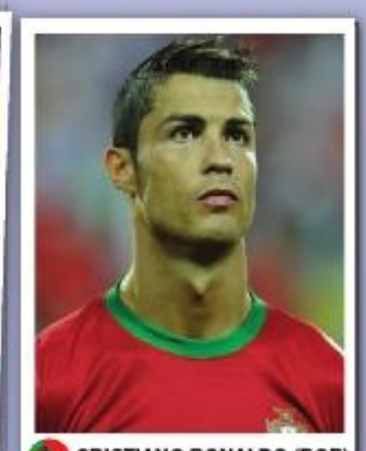
Club: Juventus
Age: 35 Caps/Gls: 108/13

YAYA TOURE (IVC)

Club: Man City
Age: 31 Caps/Gls: 82/16

ANDRES INIESTA (SPA)

Club: Barcelona
Age: 30 Caps/Gls: 94/11

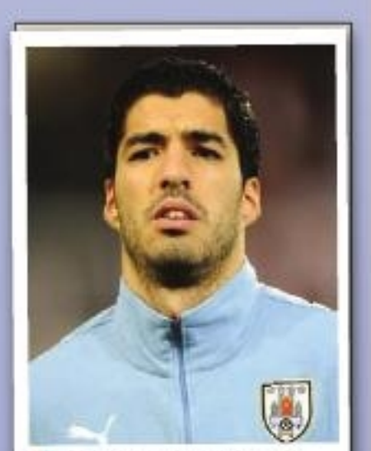


CRISTIANO RONALDO (POR)

Club: Real Madrid
Age: 29 Caps/Gls: 110/49

LIONEL MESSI (ARG)

Club: Barcelona
Age: 26 Caps/Gls: 83/37



LUIS SUAREZ (URU)

Club: Liverpool
Age: 27 Caps/Gls: 77/38

You are the boss: who would you pick for your World Cup XI?

By Mark Tattersall

SURELY it would be the easiest job in football management? Fancy being in charge of a team like this!

But first, of course, you have to pick your team.

Given the choice of all the gifted stars appearing at this summer's World Cup, who would you leave out? It's a familiar cliché, but it's a nice problem to have.

Everybody will have their favourites, no two teams would be quite the same, and the pub arguments would go on for ever. Here is how our selection panel came to a decision.

Goalkeeper wasn't too difficult, now that Iker Casillas is not even a regular for his club side, Real Madrid, with Germany's Manuel Neuer getting the nod over the veteran Italy captain, Gianluigi Buffon, and the coming man, Belgium's Thibaut Courtois.

World football is not blessed with great centre-backs at the moment, particularly since Carles Puyol retired, but our first rule is that all world teams should have an Italian defender in it, so their current vice-captain, the grizzled Giorgio Chillieni, is the pick. Alongside him, Thiago Silva may have his critics, but it is difficult not to choose the Brazil captain.

Another Brazilian, the fiery Dani Alves, and the eternally classy Germany captain Philipp Lahm are the full-backs, although the likes of Marcelo, Jordi Alba, Pablo Zabaleta and Fabio Coentrao can all feel unlucky.

In a 4-2-3-1 formation, there can surely be no argument about the two central midfielders. Yaya Toue is the only African to make the side, and the Manchester City man's power would be the perfect foil for the sublime skills of Italy's ageless genius, Andrea Pirlo. Which manager would not want those two?

At first glance, the front four looks obvious. Serial world player of the year Lionel Messi and current incumbent Cristiano Ronaldo are nailed-on selections in any team, and Luis Suarez's form for Liverpool and Uruguay in the past year make him an easy pick, too.

For the fourth spot, we agonised over Eden Hazard, Xavi Hernandez, Arturo Vidal, Thomas Muller, Franck Ribery, Arjen Robben, Neymar and Sergio Aguero, but decided there had to be at least one representative of the defending champions, and who better than 2010 World Cup final match-winner, Andres Iniesta.

And not an Englishman in sight? Hopefully, come July 13, we will be forced to change our minds on that.

Finally, spare a thought for this XI, who haven't even made it to the World Cup: Petr Cech (Czech Republic); Lukasz Piszczek (Poland), Neven Subotic (Serbia), Branislav Ivanovic (Serbia), David Alaba (Austria); Gareth Bale (Wales), Marek Hamsik (Slovakia), Christian Eriksen (Denmark), Arda Turan (Turkey); Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Sweden), Robert Lewandowski (Poland).

willing it to succeed, to lay foundations which could yield more seminal moments such as those seen in 1970.

The onus is evidently on the players themselves, not least a host team for whom even victory will never quite be enough – it is required to go hand in hand with the kind of flair and swagger which has been second-nature to so many generations of Brazilian stars.

Consider the pressure on the likes of Neymar, the Barcelona striker who was integral in his nation's Confederations Cup success, and who has what it takes to go down with the all-time greats if he can replicate that form on the biggest stage.

Such almighty expectation among a football-crazy nation of almost 200 million can hardly be tempered by the knowledge that if Neymar fails to hit the mark, the noisy neighbours could be the ones to fill his shoes.

Luis Suarez will lead Brazil's age-old rivals Uruguay into the finals as one of the most talented and controversial stars in the business, and will no doubt relish the prospect of tormenting the hosts on home soil. Neymar's Barcelona team-mate Lionel Messi is another World Cup winner waiting to happen, and there is surely nothing worse for the Brazilian nation to countenance than the idea of the man dubbed the 'New Maradona' lifting the trophy for Argentina in Rio.

The European challenge will be headed by holders Spain, Arjen Robben's Netherlands, who blazed through the qualification process with nine wins from 10 games, and Portugal, eager to prove they are more than Ballon d'Or winner Cristiano Ronaldo's one-man show.

Roy Hodgson's England approach the finals almost refreshed from the lack of expectation which swirls around his relatively young squad following the torment and tribulations of the 2010 campaign. Such slim hopes – after a group stage draw which placed them alongside Uruguay and Italy as well as Costa Rica – ought not disguise the fact that Hodgson has a number of stars who are the equal of any others on a given day.

Equally alluring are the outside chances of the likes of Ghana, who reached the quarter-finals four years ago, Chile, who proved their worth with a friendly win at Wembley in November, and Marc Wilmots' ludicrously talent-stuffed Belgian squad.

All have varying chances to make their mark and in common with all those that have gone before, stretching back to the 13-team opener in Uruguay in 1930, there will be others still who will stand up to write their names in history.

It would be wrong to imply that a sixth World Cup triumph for the host nation would provide some kind of instant, celebratory solution for the economic woes of those driven to take to the streets to protest the spiralling cost of the finals. When the World Cup roadshow has left town there will still be those shanty-towns poking up off the hillsides around Rio, just as there will be concerns over gun-crime and, ultimately, the arrival of another sporting monolith in the form of the 2016 Olympics.

But there can be no doubt the sight of Neymar and Co lifting the trophy would apply some significant balm. They claimed football came home in 1996. If that is so then this summer it is heading off on holiday, and only time will tell if it is staying for keeps.

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Miracle man Roy is on a mission

By Paul Hirst

IT seemed fitting, after almost half a century of failure, that the FA turned to a man who once claimed to have turned water into wine when they selected Fabio Capello's successor two years ago.

Ever since Sir Alf Ramsey led the Three Lions to glory on that memorable day at Wembley in 1966, eight Englishman, a Swede and an Italian have taken up the role of England manager.

All have failed.

Sven-Goran Eriksson, the Swedish element of that decatet, had the best chance of stopping the rot.

Yes, Sir Bobby Robson took England to the semi-finals of Italia '90, and Terry Venables reached the last four of the European Championship six years later.

But neither had the luck to be working with the likes of the so-called 'Golden Generation' of the time.

Eriksson failed to get the best out of David Beckham, Paul Scholes and Michael Owen – among others – when it came to tournament time.

Had the FA taken on another candidate – Roy Hodgson – when Kevin Keegan walked out on England in 2000, the story might have been different. We will never know.

What is for certain is that Hodgson, now two years into his spell as England manager, does not have such talented individuals at his disposal.

But that has not stopped Hodgson's enthusiasm for the job. The Londoner loves a challenge. He always has.

That is why he upped sticks from the capital to Sweden as a 28-year-old to take over at little-known side Halmstads BK. Halmstads had only survived relegation by virtue of goal difference in 1975, but one year later their English manager led them to be Swedish champions. Hodgson refers to it as his "Water into wine job". Few Englishmen managed abroad in the 1970s, but Hodgson had no hesitation in applying for the job.

For Hodgson, born August 9, 1947 into a modest home in Croydon, south London, was never afraid to stand out from the crowd.

While his school-mates were intoxicated by the revolutionary tones of the Rolling Stones, Hodgson's teenage years were spent listening to the likes of Timi Yuro, an American soul singer.

He was never afraid of bucking the trend. That is why he headed for Switzerland after his Scandinavian adventure, taking over the national side after a brief spell with Neuchatel Xamax.

Hodgson's work with the Swiss was near-miraculous, too. He took the nation to their first World Cup in 28 years in 1994, when they reached the second round. At one time Switzerland were ranked third in the world.

A turbulent time at Inter Milan followed. Hodgson took a poor team to the UEFA Cup final in 1997, but after being pelted by coins and lighters following the Nerazzurri's loss to Schalke, he was forced out.

More globe-trotting followed. Hodgson flitted from Blackburn, to Copenhagen to the United Arab Emirates, before returning to England with Fulham.

This time his work was given a much more English-sounding moniker – the Great Escape, leading Fulham away from relegation after taking over when the west London club were two points inside the drop zone.

He then succeeded in taking Fulham to a higher level – the Europa League final to be precise. Volcanic ash clouds, injuries and an 18-match run through the competition would not stop Hodgson taking Fulham to the final in Hamburg, where they lost to Atletico Madrid deep into extra-time.

An unsuccessful six-month spell at Liverpool did not put the FA off appointing Hodgson as national manager in 2012.

It is easy to see why. Hodgson is regarded as one of the best coaches in the game.

His globe-trotting has enabled him to speak five languages fluently, he has sat on UEFA technical committees and there are few players who have spoken negatively about their time working under him.

He is an engaging character, whose intelligence comes across clearly on camera. His favourite authors include Philip Roth, John Updike and Hermann Hesse.

Some mistake his laid-back appearances in front of the media for a lack of passion. But do not be fooled. Cuddly old Uncle Roy does not exist.

Just ask the Inter Milan press officer who Hodgson once pinned to the wall by the scruff of his neck during his time at the San Siro.

Ask Jamie Carragher and he will tell you the same.

"People think of Roy Hodgson as that nice 'good old Uncle Roy' fella'. But I've seen him lose his temper in the dressing room," said the former Liverpool captain.

That is good news for England, whose young guns may need a sharp reminder of their responsibilities.

The thousands of fans who travel to South America this summer, and the millions who watch on TV will be hoping this will be the year when Hodgson pulls off his latest miracle, for that is what England need to end 48 years of hurt.

FACTFILE Roy Hodgson

Born
9 Aug 1947, Croydon

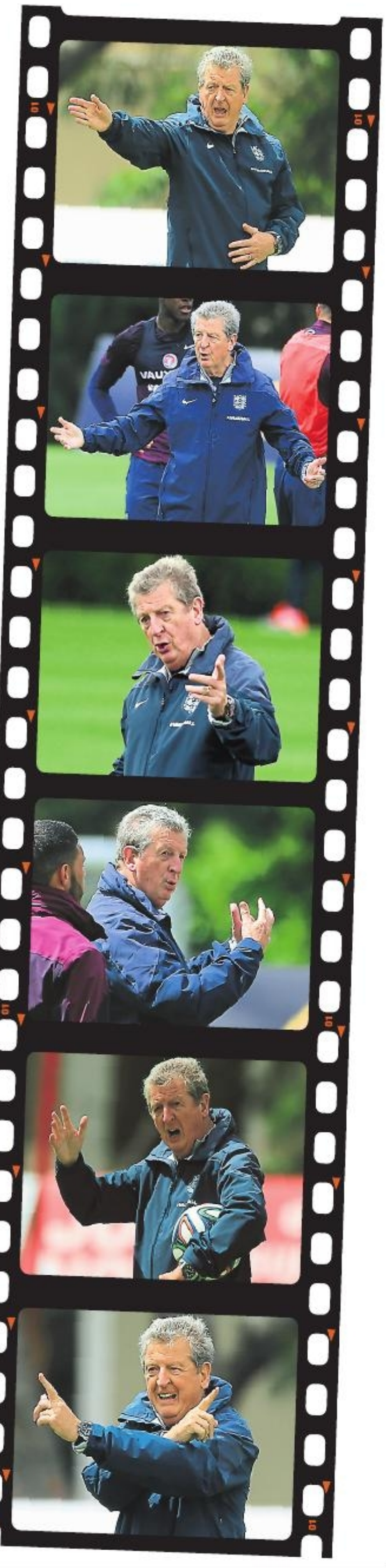
Playing career
Crystal Palace
Appearances 0
Goals 0
Non-League: Tonbridge Angels, Gravesend & Northfleet, Maidstone Utd, Ashford Town, Berea Park, Carshalton Athletic.

International teams

1992–1995	Switzerland
2002–2004	UAE
2006–2007	Finland
2012–	England

Clubs managed

1976–1980	Halmstads
1980–1982	Bristol City (asst)
1982	Bristol City
1982	IK Oddevold
1983–1984	Orebro
1985–1989	Malmo
1990–1992	Neuchatel Xamax
1995–1997	Inter Milan
1997–1998	Blackburn
1999	Inter (caretaker)
1999–2000	Grasshoppers
2000–2001	FC Copenhagen
2001	Udinese
2004–2005	Viking
2007–2010	Fulham
2010–2011	Liverpool
2011–2012	West Brom



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Ross Barkley

Exciting Barkley can prove he is no wildcard

By Andrew McDermott

ALMOST everyone in football who has tracked the development of Ross Barkley is convinced the Everton midfielder is a star in the making.

The only doubt is whether this tournament is too soon for the 20-year-old and if Roy Hodgson will give him the opportunity to shine.

After the so-called 'golden generation' of English football proved no better than those that had gone before, there are understandable calls for patience regarding the new crop.

That is certainly the warning given by Everton boss Roberto Martinez, but the Spaniard is also aware Barkley is a special talent.

He said: "Ross has incredible potential. We need to give him time and accept he is not ready yet, that he will take time, but he has absolutely everything to mark a real era in English football. Any player with talent needs to develop an understanding to know how to be effective. As a country we need to be a little bit more protective about our youngsters, because if we look after him properly he can give us something unique in English football and to the nation.

"He is developing an incredible awareness around him and technically he is someone who you could compare against the young Brazilians, Dutch or Spanish players."

Former England striker Gary Lineker has compared Barkley to Paul Gascoigne, though he will hope the former has the mental strength to cope with the growing fame and pressure.

Barkley was spotted by Everton at the age of 11 and it quickly became clear he was a bit special, including when he was asked to take four penalties and took two with each foot.

His strength and skill meant it was not obvious what his best position was but he settled into a midfield role and was playing for England Under-16s by 14.

A broken leg put his career on hold just after he had broken into Everton's first-team squad, but that is where there is a crucial difference between Barkley and Gascoigne.

While the latter was never quite the same player after famously suffering a serious knee injury at Wembley, Barkley has quickly put the injury behind him.

And while Gascoigne's World Cup career finished in tears, Barkley will hope for a happier ending.

FACTFILE
Ross Barkley

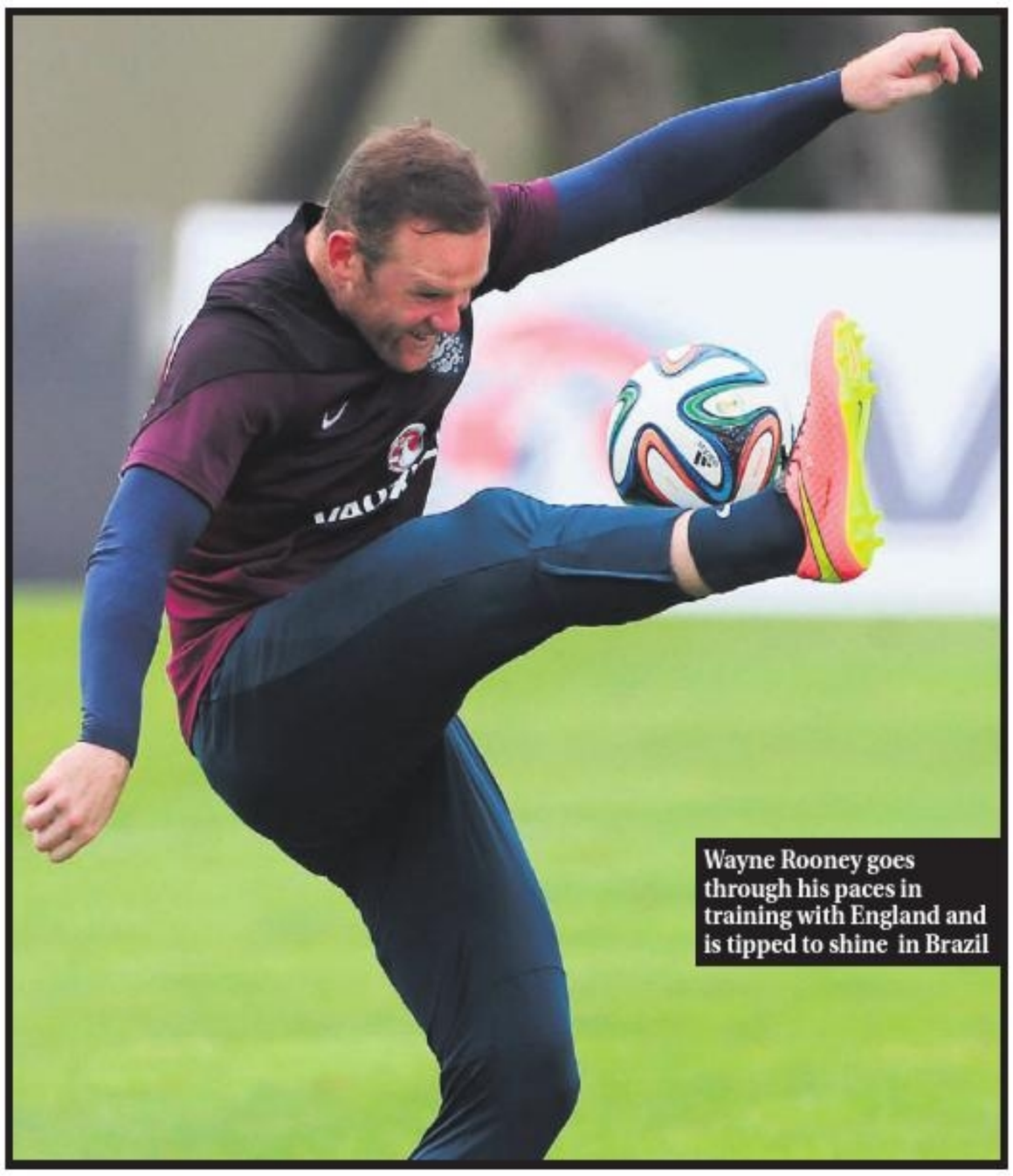
Born
5 Dec 1993, Liverpool

Clubs

Sheffield Wed (loan)	
Appearances	12 (1)
Goals	4
Leeds United (loan)	
Appearances	3 (1)
Goals	0
Everton	
Appearances	35 (21)
Goals	7

International debut
v Moldova, Sept 2013

Pele label was curse for Rooney


Wayne Rooney goes through his paces in training with England and is tipped to shine in Brazil

By Simon Peach

SVEN GORAN ERIKSSON was to blame for many of England's failures during his time in charge of the national side, but one that often goes unnoticed is his decision to publicly proclaim Wayne Rooney as the new Pele.

As Eriksson sat down to address the media in the bowels of the newly-refurbished Estadio da Luz o n June 21 2004 he used Rooney's name in the same breath as the best footballer of all time.

"I don't remember anyone making such a big impact on a tournament since Pele in the 1958 World Cup... he's a complete footballer," the then England manager said.

The Swede was flush with emotion after watching Rooney fire England into the quarter-finals of Euro 2004 with a well-taken double against Croatia. His first – a 20-yard screamer that totally bamboozled the Croatian goalkeeper – and his second – a calm finish following a deep run that began inside his own half – were top-class strikes.

The two Rooney scored against Switzerland was also was also impressive. He became the youngest scorer in European Championship history with his first, just as Pele became the youngest to find the net in World Cup history against Switzerland in 1958.

Eriksson meant his comments as a compliment, but instead those words have weighed heavy on Rooney's shoulders ever since.

Every time he puts on an England shirt at a major finals, he is weighed down by so much pressure it is like he is wearing a lead vest underneath the Three Lions which sit on his chest.

Rooney's only goal in the three major finals that he has played in since 2004 was two years ago in Euro 2012. That is a record Pele would wince at.

In the 2006 World Cup, hindered by an injury to a metatarsal in his right foot, Rooney drew a blank against Trinidad & Tobago, Sweden and Ecuador before he was sent off against Portugal as Eriksson's team went home from Germany with nothing.

Four years later in South Africa, again struggling with injury, Rooney could not find the net against the United States and Slovenia while the striker erupted in a fit of rage after the goalless draw against Algeria, criticising the England fans who booed the team off.

Rooney also flopped in the 4-1 defeat to Germany in the second round. Sir Alex Ferguson, who had watched Rooney bang in 34 goals for United that year, said his star striker could not deal with the pressure on his shoulders at the 2010 World Cup.

"There was such expectation on him," the former United manager said.

"There was talk that he was going to be the player of the tournament, that he was going to outshine (Lionel) Messi and (Cristiano) Ronaldo and he's not got great experience of World Cups really. You wait, though. In Brazil you will see a different player."

Will Ferguson be right? Will the real Rooney stand up in Brazil just as so many England fans want him to?

Rooney missed the last three games of United's season with a groin problem, which came a month after a toe injury which prevented him from kicking a ball properly, according to then manager David Moyes.

But the striker is so determined to be fit that he took two physios on holiday with him to Portugal recently. "This time I honestly feel good," the former Everton striker said. "I have looked after myself and will be as fit as I can for this tournament. I will be ready. I'm looking forward to it."

The fact Rooney will share the spotlight with the likes of Daniel Sturridge, Raheem Sterling and Adam Lallana – who have all been on fire this year – will reduce the pressure on England's talisman.

Unlike Eriksson, Hodgson is wise enough to dodge comparisons. The England manager knows Rooney's physical and mental state will be key to his chances of success in the sweltering heat of Brazil. And the 66-year-old thinks this time Rooney will not fail. "This is the perfect opportunity for him to prove to people around the world what we already know – that he is a gifted footballer, capable of playing in many positions and someone who is a leading light in his team, which is one of the best in the world," he said.

"It would be nice to see him reproducing that form for England and I am confident he will."

Rooney does not have enough time to rack up three World Cup winner's medals like Pele did, but that will not matter to the striker and his legions of fans.

One would be enough.

FACTFILE
Wayne Rooney

Born
24 October 1985, Liverpool

Clubs

Everton	
Appearances	48 (29)
Goals	17
Manchester Utd	
Appearances	396 (45)
Goals	217

International debut
v Australia, February 2003

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Prandelli held in highest regard

CESARE PRANDELLI is still to take charge at his first World Cup, but has already claimed a monumental victory as the coach of Italy.

In breaking with tradition, the country's football federation (FIGC) has told the Brescia native that he will remain in charge of the national team no matter what happens in Brazil.

None of Prandelli's predecessors had such a guarantee heading into a major tournament.

Prandelli's contract was set to expire this summer, but the 56-year-old will now remain in charge until the end of Euro 2016.

"It gives me great pride that the federation has proposed to me a two-year contract extension regardless of the results in Brazil," said Prandelli.

"The Federation has sent an extraordinary message, that you don't just focus on the end result, but rather on what has been done and what can be done."

Prandelli replaced Marcello Lippi at the helm in 2010, looking to restore national pride after Italy's failure to progress past the group stages of the World Cup in South Africa.

He needed to rejuvenate an Azzurri squad that had many ageing players from the 2006 World Cup-winning side. Good results have followed ever since.

Prandelli has won 22 and lost just 11 of his 51 games in charge of Italy. The former Juventus midfielder led Italy to the final of Euro 2012 and to third place in last year's Confederations Cup.

The Azzurri ended their World Cup qualifying campaign unbeaten and top of Group B with 22 points from 10 games. "The renewal of Cesare's contract is a signal for the future," said FIGC president Giancarlo Abete. "There is great confidence in his work and in his staff."

Since taking over, Prandelli has demanded the best behaviour from his players, whether playing for Italy or their clubs.

"The ethics code is with us and non-negotiable," said Prandelli. "The players must have the strength not to fall for provocations."

Unruly behaviour has hurt Italy in in the past, with Francesco Totti being banned in Euro 2004 for spitting at an opponent and Roma's Daniele De Rossi suspended during the 2006 World Cup for elbowing the USA's Brian McBride.

Prandelli has stood by his decisions, making no exceptions, even if it meant leaving the likes of Mario Balotelli out of selection for a crucial qualifier.

Prandelli has also emphasised the importance of the social responsibility of the national team towards the country.

As part of the Vivi Azzurro project, the national team have visited the Sollicciano prison in Florence to speak to inmates and has also trained in towns that have been hit by natural disasters.

"It's in Prandelli's and the national team's DNA to show a sense of responsibility," said Abete.

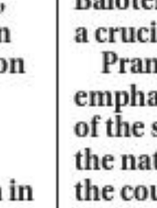
As for Prandelli, he does not consider it a duty as coach, but that of a human being. "We cannot forget that the Azzurri jersey you wear on loan and that one has to honour it," he said.

"We have to give joy to those that are going through difficult times."

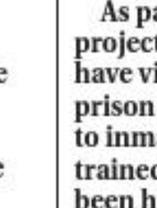
His solidarity and correctness have earned him the respect of the nation.

ITALY

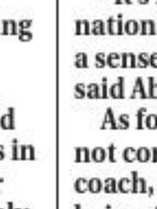
Coach Cesare Prandelli
Has revolutionised a side at its lowest ebb after the debacle of South Africa with a blend of youth and experience, and an insistence on player discipline on club and national duty.



Star man
Andrea Pirlo (Juventus)
The elegant playmaker has the gift of picking out a team-mate from anywhere on the pitch, at any speed and typically with devastating results. Also a brilliant dead-ball expert.



One to watch
Mario Balotelli (AC Milan)
As capable of lighting up any game as he is likely to have a meltdown and damage the Azzurri from within, but nevertheless a rare talent.



How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1934	WINNERS
1938	WINNERS
1950	1st round
1954	1st round
1962	1st round
1966	1st round
1970	Runners-up
1974	1st round
1978	4th place
1982	WINNERS
1986	Round of 16
1990	3rd place
1994	Runners-up
1998	Quarter-finals
2002	Round of 16
2006	WINNERS
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 9
Stan James odds 25-1

Ciro Immobile has blossomed at Torino and finished this season as Serie A's top scorer

Ciro school of hard knocks

By Cindy Garcia-Bennett

NOTHING is as valuable to a football player as experience.

Ciro Immobile needed a year of transition to Serie A before he could blossom into one of Italy's most lethal strikers.

Following a debut campaign in Italy's top flight in which he scored only five goals in 33 league appearances for Genoa and, after hearing criticism that he was not ready for the big time, Immobile has proved week-in and week-out this season at Torino that he does have what it takes.

The 24-year-old has finished as the "capocannoniere", the top scorer in Serie A, with 22 goals in 33 League games, and his performances helped Torino finish seventh in the standings.

He also made his senior debut with Italy in an international friendly against world champions Spain in March.

"Last season he struggled, but Ciro has character," said Italy coach Cesare Prandelli. "He has a striker's DNA and he has not been affected by negative experiences. Many said he wasn't ready for Serie A, but now those critics praise him. He is doing very well."

The journey has not been easy.

Immobile joined Juventus in 2009, but had loan spells at Siena, Grossetto and Pescara. It was at the latter where his career began to take off. He scored a Serie B record 28 goals to help Pescara finish top in the 2011-12 campaign and gain promotion before he joined Genoa. "I will always remain a fan of Pescara," said Immobile. "It was my launchpad to top football."

Immobile's hopes of playing for Juve, the club that had signed him at the age of 18 for 80,000 euros, were dashed when the Italian giants sold part of his rights to cross-town rivals Torino last summer.

"Despite my (Juve) past, I was welcomed in the Torino camp with a lot of enthusiasm, something I didn't expect would happen," said Immobile. "I was very touched. (Torino coach Giampiero) Ventura is similar to (Pescara coach Zdenek) Zeman.

"From a tactical and character standpoint, they have both made me grow as a person and as a player. I will never stop thanking Ventura, because this has been a great step for me."

Immobile forged a potent attacking partnership with Alessio Cerci at Torino, with his team-mate notching 13 goals and setting up 11 others in Serie A. Prandelli spoke during the season of Cerci's unselfishness and it was no surprise when he, too, made Italy's squad. "I'm really happy that the national team coach has considered Cerci and I for the squad," said Immobile. "On the pitch we understand each other very well."

> "To have overtaken two legends like Pulici and Graziani gives me great pride"

The year has been so good for Immobile that the Neapolitan has surpassed Torino greats Paolo Pulici and Francesco Graziani with a single-season record of goals.

Toro's all-time scorer Pulici and Graziani had each scored 21 goals.

"To have overtaken two legends like Pulici and Graziani gives me great pride," he said. "I think I am very similar to them in character and also in my mindset to always play my best. I have worked so hard to reach this level, but I never expected to have such a season.

"Even though we just missed out on qualifying for European football next season, our aim was for our fans to enjoy watching us play again."

Immobile has raised plenty of eyebrows this season and not just in Italy, with German side Borussia Dortmund, who will play in the Champions League next season, leading the chase to sign him this summer.

"It will be difficult to turn down an important offer from abroad," he said. "But in the future I would love to play for Napoli, my home club."

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SCAN ME

Is history repeating?

Ghiggia scores for Uruguay to silence the Maracana in the 1950 World Cup final

By Andrew McDermott

TWO-TIME World Cup winners Uruguay return to the scene of their greatest triumph having endured now customary struggles in securing a place at the finals.

Even allowing for the gruelling nature of the South American section, La Celeste tend to make qualification harder than most.

Buoyed by their 2011 Copa America triumph, Uruguay made a flying start to the campaign, with three of their opening four home games in Montevideo producing four-goal victories.

Despite sitting top of the standings with 11 points from five matches, the wheels came off dramatically for Oscar Tabarez's men.

A 4-0 thrashing away to Colombia began a run of six matches without a win before a relative recovery in the later rounds booked Uruguay into their fourth consecutive inter-continental play-off.

This familiarity with death-or-glory assignments over two legs stood them in fine stead as Jordan were demolished 5-0 during the opening game – a stellar forward line led by Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani enjoying a field day.

A goalless draw at home completed the formality and Tabarez will lead a group with undoubted pedigree when it comes to competing at the highest level.

Suarez's ability has never been in doubt but, last season, the mercurial forward parked his penchant for controversy and established himself as one of the world's finest players.

His 11 goals in qualification and performances in the 2011 Copa America demonstrate this constant menace to any defence is equally talismanic for his country as he is for Liverpool.

However, a recent operation on a knee has raised doubts that he will be fit for the opening game.

The current squad is an ageing one, and their mid-qualification slump offers a stark reminder of the team's vulnerabilities.

Nevertheless, hopes remain high for the country that silenced the Maracana to pip Brazil to the 1950 World Cup in their own back yard.

Few coaches in the competition will be able to match Tabarez when it comes to experience. His association with the tournament dates back to 1990, when he led Uruguay to the quarter-finals in Italy. The way he negotiated qualifying this time around showed he remains one of the game's shrewdest tacticians.

URURUGUAY

Coach Oscar Tabarez
Led Uruguay to the quarter-finals in 1990, and returned for a second spell with La Celeste in 2006, leading them to the 2010 semi-finals and glory in the 2011 Copa America.

Star man
Luis Suarez (Liverpool)
An 11-goal haul in qualification and the player-of-the-tournament award at the 2011 Copa America show he is a big threat, but a recent knee op but delay his entry into the competition.

One to watch
Edinson Cavani (PSG)
As if Suarez was not enough, Uruguay have another of the world's top strikers. The centre-forward is lethal in the air and with both feet.

How they qualified
Intercontinental play-off

World Cup record

1930	WINNERS
1950	WINNERS
1954	4th place
1962	1st round
1966	Quarter-finals
1970	4th place
1974	1st round
1986	Round of 16
1990	Round of 16
2002	1st round
2010	4th place

FIFA ranking 5
Stan James odds 25-1

Bryan Ruiz is Costa Rica's star man – but is infuriatingly inconsistent

Talented Ruiz will hope to provide spark

COSTA RICA return to make their fourth World Cup finals appearance and coach Jorge Luis Pinto's youthful squad will be intent on springing a few surprises.

Thrown into a daunting Group D line-up alongside Uruguay, Italy and England, little is expected of the Central American nation, but Pinto's men should prove a wholly different proposition to the last Costa Rica team to reach world football's grandest stage eight years ago.

At the 2006 tournament in Germany, Los Ticos trudged home without a point to their name – a brace from flamboyant striker and national hero Paulo Wanchope in the opening match against the hosts one of few memorable moments in a wretched campaign.

The 2002 vintage also fell at the first hurdle, unable to emulate a World Cup debut at Italia '90 under globe-trotting coach Bora Milutinovic. Victories over Sweden and Scotland before elimination at the hands of Czechoslovakia in the round of 16 still represent a high for Costa Rican football.

Such a return this time around would make a mockery of pre-tournament oddsmakers, but a significant pool of European-based players means the pedigree Pinto has at his disposal should not be doubted.

Previous World Cup experience will be lacking, but attacker Bryan Ruiz, Levante goalkeeper Keylor Navas' and Olympiakos' on-loan Arsenal forward Joel Campbell lead a strong European contingent.

Twelve of these featured among the squad as Ruiz – who is temporarily plying his trade in Holland with PSV Eindhoven – and Real Salt Lake's Alvaro Saborio netted to see off Mexico in the final round of CONCACAF matches, with qualification already secured. Ruiz is undoubtedly the star man but, in the tradition of Costa Rica's previous leading light Wanchope, he can appear a world-beater one week and a no-hoper the next.

Fulham supporters did not see much of his talent on display after his move to Craven Cottage in August 2011, but his loan spell at PSV Eindhoven looks to have him back to his best ahead of the tournament.

However, Pinto's men are unlikely to survive beyond the group stages.

COSTA RICA

Coach Jorge Luis Pinto
The Colombian first took charge of Los Ticos in 2004, only to be dismissed a year later. Costa Rica failed at the 2006 finals and were absent in 2010, prompting Pinto's return.

Star man
Bryan Ruiz (Fulham)
Fulham fans saw too little of his best following a big-money move in August 2011 but, luckily for Costa Rica, a loan move to PSV Eindhoven has revitalised their star man.

One to watch
Joel Campbell (Arsenal)
Shot to prominence on loan at Olympiakos with a superb goal in the Champions League victory over Manchester United this season.

How they qualified
Second, Concacaf

World Cup record

1990	Round of 16
2002	1st round
2006	1st round

FIFA ranking 34
Stan James odds 3000-1

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20 21 September 2014 - Agatha Christie Weekend - celebrating the famous author's links with Cholsey and Wallingford.

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Right said FRED

No.9 could be the real star behind Brazil success

By James Cann

MORE than £50million was spent to bring Neymar to Barcelona, but Brazil will find their most valuable asset playing his club football at the Maracana.

His mononym may be a familiar one in Europe but, despite capturing attention with the occasional flash of inspiration during his four-year stint with Lyon, Fred is not a household name outside Brazil.

But that could change quickly if he helps lead the Selecao to World Cup glory. Fans of the five-time world champions have always obsessed over their strikers – players like Pele, Romario and Ronaldo have electrified football fans around the world – but heading into a first World Cup on home soil since 1950 concerns have been raised over an absence of true stars up front.

Most irritatingly, Atletico Madrid hot-shot Diego Costa has turned his back on the country of his birth to represent Spain.

And while Neymar echoes the exciting style of play made famous by the likes of Ronaldinho and Garrincha with his playmaking ability, he can lack the killer touch required in the box when he is not scoring spectacular goals.

He will not, therefore, lead the line for Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, who will instead use the Nou Camp starlet as a young foil for a 30-year-old who regularly scores in a near-deserted stadium.

Fred headed home to Brazil and Rio de Janeiro club Fluminense after being released by Lyon in early 2009. Strong in the air, intelligent and skilful on the ball, Fred soon became a fan favourite.

He scored twice on his debut and broke Magno Alves' league scoring record when firing his 44th Brasileiro goal in 2011. He had not featured for Brazil since 2007, but his exploits in the capital city earned him a place in the 2011 Copa America squad. And by the summer of 2013, he was firmly established as Brazil's first-choice No.9.

> "Beyond his goalscoring prowess, Fred is highly skilled in creating space for his team-mates"

He emerged from the bench to score against England at Wembley in the first game of Scolari's second spell in charge. He stayed in the team and hit further goals against Italy, Russia and – once again – England, this time at the newly-renovated Maracana.

The best was yet to come as Fred lit up the Confederations Cup with two goals against Italy, one against Uruguay, and two in the final victory over Spain.

Beyond his goalscoring prowess he is highly skilled in distracting opposition defences and creating space for his team-mates – a trait he used to devastating effect when freeing up Neymar to score a hat-trick in March's 5-0 victory over South Africa.

A succession of leg injuries threatened to wreck Fred's World Cup dream by sidelining him for four months in late 2013, but he has battled his way back to full fitness to make Scolari's squad.

Off the pitch he has found religion and reined in some of his more extravagant habits – notoriety has followed him around the bars and nightclubs of Rio in recent years.

But Scolari, forever devoted to the idea of the traditional Brazilian number nine, is banking on Fred retaining his maverick edge for a few weeks yet.

Flair and work-rate is potent mix

EVER since the FIFA World Cup was awarded to Brazil for a second time back in 2007 the excitement has been building – can the Selecao win the biggest prize in football for a sixth time? And on home soil?

There is always pressure on Brazil to win the World Cup, but seldom will a nation feel the burden of expectation more than the Samba Boys this summer.

Statistics show that one in three hosts are victorious and Luiz Felipe Scolari will not be disappointed with the favourites' Group A opponents as he looks to lift his second World Cup in 12 years.

But Croatia, Mexico and Cameroon know that the aura of invincibility surrounding Brazil has gone, having watched them crash out at the quarter-final stage in 2010 and 2006 and fail to progress beyond the last eight at the 2011 Copa America.

Mano Menezes, an inexperienced international manager, eventually bit the bullet and back came the overwhelmingly popular Scolari – their World Cup-winning coach from 2002. After a slow start, which saw them fail to beat Italy, Russia, Chile and England twice, everything clicked into place at last summer's Confederations Cup.

A tactical tweak saw Neymar nudged out to the left, with Fluminense forward Fred as the lone striker, and the pair were in devastating form as an electric Maracana watched them dismantle world and European champions Spain 3-0 in the final.

A year on and that settled system will be utilised once more, with Julio Cesar in goal behind Dani Alves, Thiago Silva, David Luiz and Marcelo.

Scolari is spoilt for choice when it comes to selecting the supporting acts behind his lone striker Fred with Oscar, Lucas Moura, Willian, Hulk and Neymar providing flair and attacking verse to counterbalance the dynamism and work-rate of Ramires, Paulinho and Luiz Gustavo (inset).

Brazil fans have had plenty to celebrate down the years but, if Scolari can work his magic on that exciting pool of talent, then winning the World Cup in their own backyard would surely spark a party to end all parties.

BRAZIL

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari
Twelve years after leading his country to World Cup glory in Japan and South Korea back in 2002, 'Big Phil' Scolari is hoping lightning strikes twice this summer.

Star man
Neymar (Barcelona)
One of the world's most expensive when he moved to Barcelona from Santos last May, and a month later he was voted as the Confederations Cup's best player as Brazil lifted the trophy.

One to watch
Thiago Silva (PSG)
The imposing centre-back is strong in the air and comfortable on the ball, and is set to earn his 50th cap at the start of the tournament.

How they qualified
Hosts

World Cup record

1930	1st round
1934	1st round
1938	3rd place
1950	Runners-up
1954	Quarter-finals
1958	WINNERS
1962	WINNERS
1966	1st round
1970	WINNERS
1974	4th place
1978	3rd place
1982	2nd round
1986	Quarter-finals
1990	Round of 16
1994	WINNERS
1998	Runners-up
2002	WINNERS
2006	Quarter-finals
2010	Quarter-finals
FIFA ranking	4
Stan James odds	3-1

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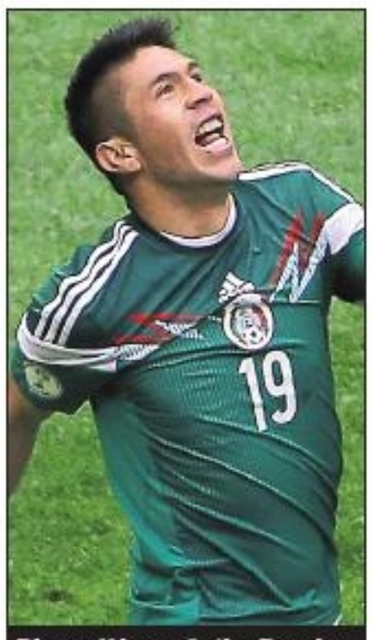

Play-off hero Oribe Peralta

Herrera targets semi-finals after qualifying close shave

IT took four coaches, 47 players, a near 14-000 mile round trip and a favour from the USA, but Mexico eventually made it to their 15th World Cup finals.

Confidence was high going into the 10-game Concacaf qualifying campaign, having clinched gold at the London 2012 Olympics, but their form at the traditional fortress of the Azteca deserted Mexico as they endured three goalless draws and a shock loss to Honduras to put their participation in real jeopardy.

That defeat, only their second in 78 matches at their 104,000-seater home, saw Jose Manuel Chepo de la Torre axed and his assistant Jose Luis Tena's reign lasted only one match.

Victor Manuel Vucetich, known as King Midas, showed anything but a golden touch during his two-game spell, which ended with his sacking after defeat to Costa Rica. That left El Tri grateful to bitter rivals USA, whose incredible late victory over Panama saw Mexico sneak into the play-offs, where they came up against New Zealand.

In stepped Miguel Herrera, borrowed from Club America, to steady the ship and he controversially stuck with what he knew, leaving out the overseas stars in favour of home-based players, including seven of his own in the starting line-up.

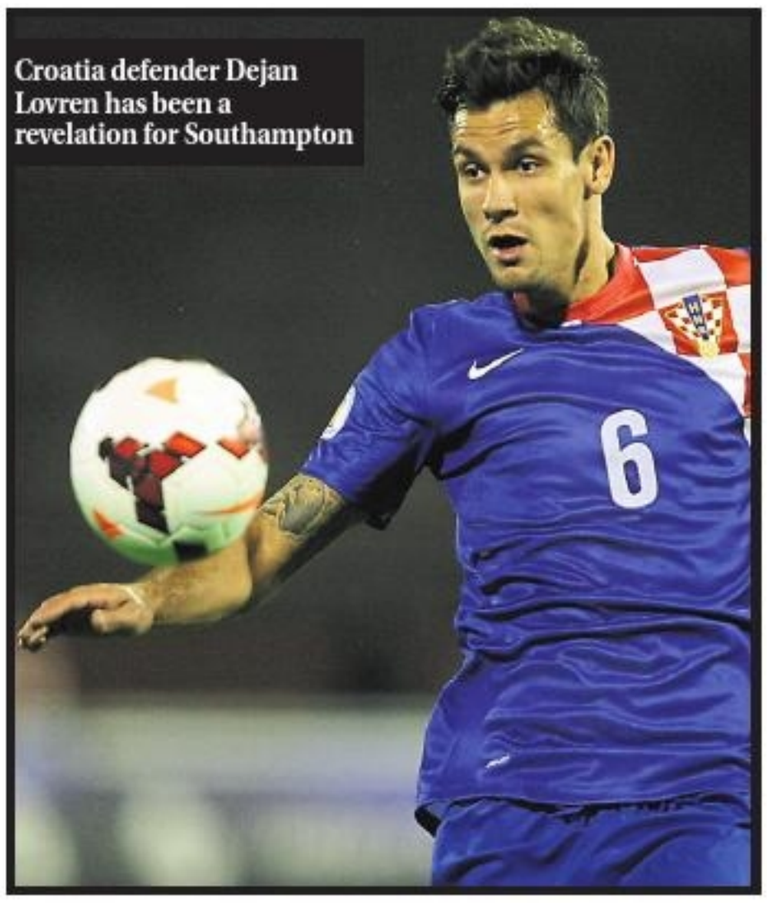
The gamble paid off with Santos Laguna striker Oribe Peralta netting twice in Mexico City and then grabbing a hat-trick in Wellington to seal a 9-3 aggregate victory.

Mexico's chances of making waves this summer could well depend on the form of their play-off hero, who has previous against Group A favourites Brazil, having scored both goals as they won the 2012 Olympic final.

He will be joined by European club stars such as Javier Hernandez, Javier Aquino and Andres Guardado, as well as home-grown talents like giant América striker Raul Jimenez, Tigres centre-back Hugo Ayala and León's midfielder Carlos Pena.

They almost missed out on a World Cup for the first time since 1990, but Mexico have reached the knockout stages in the last four tournaments and Herrera is backing his men to go beyond the quarter-finals for the first time. "We want to be among the top four," he said. "Our group is very tough, but we want to make history in Brazil."

Croatia bidding to summon spirit of '98


Croatia defender Dejan Lovren has been a revelation for Southampton

HOPES are high in Croatia that they can produce their best World Cup showing since their debut in 1998.

Back then, the Croats finished third in France, with striker Davor Suker finishing as the Golden Boot winner and Robert Prosinecki shining in midfield.

Now faith has been placed in Mario Mandzukic and Luka Modric to lead the country to the knockout stages once again, after Croatia failed to get through their group in both 2002 and 2006 and failed to qualify last time in South Africa.

Following another group-stage exit from Euro 2012, head coach Slaven Bilic was replaced at the helm by fellow France '98 veteran Igor Stimac, who proved to be an unpopular choice.

A stuttering campaign, which included two defeats to Scotland and a loss at home to group winners Belgium, left Croatia with only a play-off place, and Stimac was sacked before the two-legged tie with Iceland.

In came Under-21 coach Niko Kovac, the country's former captain. He negotiated the play-offs, but they came at a price.

Mandzukic was sent off while defender Josip Simunic led the fans in a post-match chant that carried pro-Nazi connotations, which landed the veteran a 10-match ban. However, the apparent damage does not appear to be as serious as first thought.

Bayern Munich striker Mandzukic will miss only one game – the opener against Brazil – and will be available to face Cameroon and Mexico in the games that will likely decide Croatia's fate.

In defence, Simunic's absence will not be felt should Dejan Lovren, the likely partner for Vedran Corluka in the back four, continue the form that has made him a revelation at Southampton. Meanwhile, the midfield will be built around Modric, who has morphed from a squad player to a first-choice starter for Real Madrid in the past season, while Sevilla's Ivan Rakitic is another who has shone in Spain.

Should the duo produce the same form in Brazil, with Lovren offering defensive security and Mandzukic a goal threat, Croatia could well reach the second round for the first time in 16 years.

Memories of Milla no longer enough for Cameroon

THINK of Cameroon at the World Cup and 1990 springs immediately to mind, with Roger Milla dancing at the corner flag.

The Indomitable Lions are assured of their place in World Cup folklore, but they, and the rest of the footballing world know, they need to start creating new memories on the big stage.

It is not as though they have not had enough chances to do so, and this will be their seventh appearance at the finals – a record for an African nation – thanks to a qualifying campaign that featured only one defeat.

The Cameroon public remain unconvinced about the side's merits, though, with former skipper Patrick Mboma among those scotching talk of a successful tournament.

A last-16 place, something they last achieved in Italy, would mark that, but recent history is not on their side. They failed to collect a point at South Africa 2010, and performances on the home front in the African Cup of Nations have left a lot to be desired, failing to make the finals in both 2012 and 2013.

It is no surprise that much of what they hope to do hinges on Samuel Eto'o. While many of their players have high-level experience, the veteran Chelsea man is their main weapon and has a proven track record of producing when it matters.

The 33-year-old came out of retirement for the play-off win over Tunisia and, after a quietly impressive season with Chelsea, heads to South America in good shape.

Behind him, Barcelona enforcer Alex Song will look to show the world he can cut it when it matters, having failed to convince since his move to the Catalan giants.

World Cup history dictates that one African side usually steals the show, with Ghana the neutral's champion in 2010. Cameroon have the pedigree and, in Eto'o, the figurehead, but it will take a real effort from coach Volker Finke to get out of their group.

CROATIA

Coach Niko Kovac
Promoted from coaching the under-21 side to rescue the senior squad following Igor Stimac's troubled spell in charge and began with a morale-boosting play-off success.

Star man
Mario Mandzukic (Bayern Munich)
The 2012 Champions League final goalscorer will miss the opener against Brazil, as he serves a suspension for his dismissal against Iceland.

One to watch
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)
The Sevilla playmaker will forge one of the most creative midfield partnerships in the tournament alongside Real Madrid's Luka Modric.

How they qualified
Europe play-off winners

World Cup record

1998	3rd place
2002	1st round
2006	1st round

FIFA ranking 20
Stan James odds 200-1

MEXICO

Coach Miguel Herrera
First appointed on an interim basis, he shocked Mexican football with his controversial squad for their play-off, but after beating New Zealand was handed a permanent deal.

Star man
Javier Hernandez (Man Utd)
The third generation of his family to play at a World Cup finals, Chicharito scored twice in the 2010 finals in South Africa and is Mexico's third highest scorer of all time.

One to watch
Giovani dos Santos (Villarreal)
The versatile playmaker has turned around his club career after hugely frustrating spells at Barcelona and Tottenham.

How they qualified
Intercontinental play-off

World Cup record

1930	1st round
1950	1st round
1954	1st round
1958	1st round
1962	1st round
1966	1st round
1970	Quarter-finals
1978	1st round
1986	Quarter-finals
1994	Round of 16
1998	Round of 16
2002	Round of 16
2006	Round of 16
2010	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 19
Stan James odds 125-1

CAMEROON

Coach Volker Finke
Rumours of unrest in the camp persist, as does talk of a rift with star striker Samuel Eto'o, and the veteran German tactician's main task will be to run a steady ship in Brazil.

Star man
Samuel Eto'o (Chelsea)
The modern-day Roger Milla in Cameroon, the 33-year-old came out of international retirement to help his nation qualify and needs a good World Cup on his CV.

One to watch
Alex Song (Barcelona)
May not be a standout performer at Barcelona as he was at Arsenal, but still a player to be feared and could see the World Cup as a shop window.

How they qualified
Africa play-off winners

World Cup record

1982	1st round
1990	Quarter-finals
1994	1st round
1998	1st round
2002	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 50
Stan James odds 1000-1

LATEST COLOMBIA BETTING: 28/1*
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BRAZIL 2014 WORLD

GROUP A

June 12, 9pm, Sao Paulo	ITV
BRAZIL	
CROATIA	
June 13, 5pm, Natal	ITV
MEXICO	
CAMEROON	
June 17, 8pm, Fortaleza	BBC
BRAZIL	
MEXICO	
June 18, 11pm, Manaus	ITV
CAMEROON	
CROATIA	
June 23, 9pm, Brasilia	ITV
CAMEROON	
BRAZIL	
June 23, 9pm, Recife	ITV
CROATIA	
MEXICO	

GROUP A TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

GROUP B

June 13, 8pm, Salvador	BBC
SPAIN	
NETHERLANDS	
June 13, 11pm, Cuiaba	ITV
CHILE	
AUSTRALIA	
June 18, 8pm, Rio de Janeiro	BBC
SPAIN	
CHILE	
June 18, 5pm, Porto Alegre	ITV
AUSTRALIA	
NETHERLANDS	
June 23, 5pm, Curitiba	ITV
AUSTRALIA	
SPAIN	
June 23, 5pm, Sao Paulo	ITV
NETHERLANDS	
CHILE	

GROUP B TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

GROUP C

June 14, 5pm, Belo Horizonte	BBC
COLOMBIA	
GREECE	
June 15, 2am, Recife	ITV
IVORY COAST	
JAPAN	
June 19, 5pm, Brasilia	BBC
COLOMBIA	
IVORY COAST	
June 19, 11pm, Natal	BBC
JAPAN	
GREECE	
June 24, 9pm, Cuiaba	BBC
JAPAN	
COLOMBIA	
June 24, 9pm, Fortaleza	BBC
GREECE	
IVORY COAST	

GROUP C TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

GROUP D

June 14, 8pm, Fortaleza	ITV
URUGUAY	
COSTA RICA	
June 14, 11pm, Manaus	BBC
ENGLAND	
ITALY	
June 19, 8pm, Sao Paulo	ITV
URUGUAY	
ENGLAND	
June 20, 5pm, Recife	BBC
ITALY	
COSTA RICA	
June 24, 5pm, Natal	ITV
ITALY	
URUGUAY	
June 24, 5pm, Belo Horizonte	ITV
COSTA RICA	
ENGLAND	

GROUP D TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

ROUND OF 16

1. June 28, 5pm, Belo Horizonte	
WINNER A	
RUNNER-UP B	
2. June 28, 9pm, Rio de Janeiro	
WINNER C	
RUNNER-UP D	
3. June 29, 5pm, Fortaleza	
WINNER B	
RUNNER-UP A	
4. June 29, 9pm, Recife	
WINNER D	
RUNNER-UP C	
5. June 30, 5pm, Brasilia	
WINNER E	
RUNNER-UP F	
6. June 30, 9pm, Porto Alegre	
WINNER G	
RUNNER-UP H	
7. July 1, 5pm, Sao Paulo	
WINNER F	
RUNNER-UP E	
8. July 1, 9pm, Salvador	
WINNER H	
RUNNER-UP G	

QUARTER-FINALS

A. July 4, 9pm, Fortaleza	
WINNER 1	
WINNER 2	
B. July 4, 5pm, Rio de Janeiro	
WINNER 5	
WINNER 6	
C. July 5, 9pm, Salvador	
WINNER 3	
WINNER 4	
D. July 5, 5pm, Brasilia	
WINNER 7	
WINNER 8	

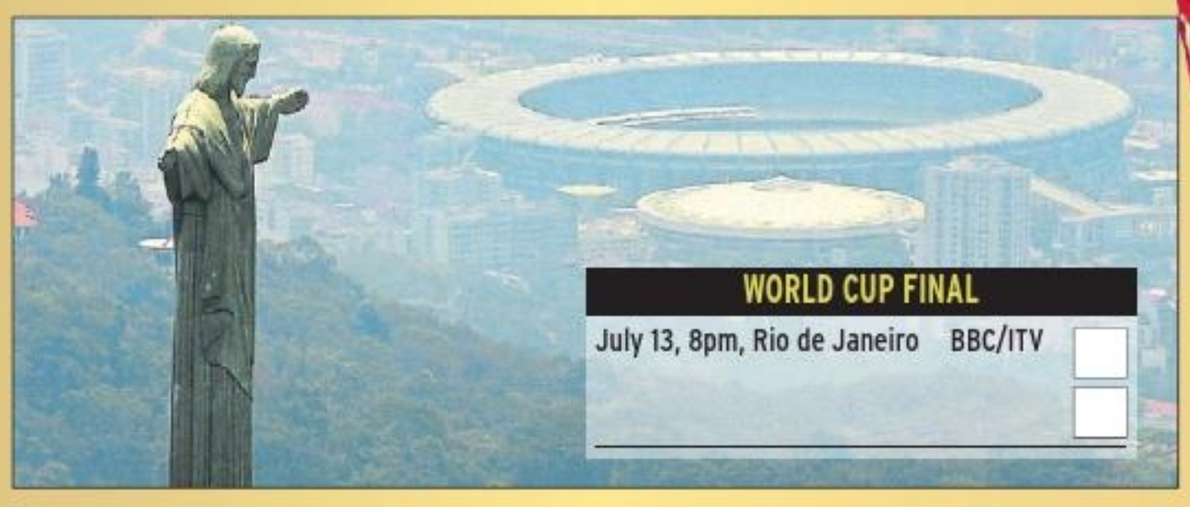
SEMI-FINALS

July 8, 9pm, Belo Horizonte	
WINNER A	
WINNER B	
July 9, 9pm, Sao Paulo	
WINNER C	
WINNER D	

3RD/4TH PLAY-OFF

July 12, 9pm, Brasilia	

All kick-off times are BST



WORLD CUP FINAL

July 13, 8pm, Rio de Janeiro	BBC/ITV

LATEST GHANA BETTING: 150/1*

CUP WALLCHART

GROUP E

June 15, 5pm, Brasilia	ITV
SWITZERLAND	
ECUADOR	
June 15, 8pm, Porto Alegre	BBC
FRANCE	
HONDURAS	
June 20, 8pm, Salvador	ITV
SWITZERLAND	
FRANCE	
June 20, 11pm, Curitiba	ITV
HONDURAS	
ECUADOR	
June 25, 9pm, Manaus	BBC
HONDURAS	
SWITZERLAND	
June 25, 9pm, Rio de Janeiro	BBC
ECUADOR	
FRANCE	

GROUP E TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

GROUP F

June 15, 11pm, Rio de Janeiro	BBC
ARGENTINA	
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	
June 16, 8pm, Curitiba	BBC
IRAN	
NIGERIA	
June 21, 5pm, Belo Horizonte	ITV
ARGENTINA	
IRAN	
June 21, 11pm, Cuiaba	BBC
NIGERIA	
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	
June 25, 5pm, Porto Alegre	ITV
NIGERIA	
ARGENTINA	
June 25, 5pm, Salvador	ITV
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	
IRAN	

GROUP F TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

GROUP G

June 16, 5pm, Salvador	ITV
GERMANY	
PORTUGAL	
June 16, 11pm, Natal	BBC
GHANA	
UNITED STATES	
June 21, 8pm, Fortaleza	BBC
GERMANY	
GHANA	
June 22, 11pm, Manaus	BBC
UNITED STATES	
PORTUGAL	
June 26, 5pm, Recife	BBC
UNITED STATES	
GERMANY	
June 26, 5pm, Brasilia	BBC
PORTUGAL	
GHANA	

GROUP G TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

GROUP H

June 17, 5pm, Belo Horizonte	ITV
BELGIUM	
ALGERIA	
June 17, 11pm, Cuiaba	BBC
RUSSIA	
KOREA REPUBLIC	
June 22, 5pm, Rio de Janeiro	BBC
BELGIUM	
RUSSIA	
June 22, 8pm, Porto Alegre	ITV
KOREA REPUBLIC	
ALGERIA	
June 26, 9pm, Sao Paulo	ITV
KOREA REPUBLIC	
BELGIUM	
June 26, 9pm, Curitiba	ITV
ALGERIA	
RUSSIA	

GROUP H TABLE

Team	Pts
1	
2	
3	
4	

From left: Andres Iniesta (Spain), Lionel Messi (Argentina), Wayne Rooney (England), Cristiano Ronaldo (Portugal), Neymar (Brazil)

WORLD CUP WINNERS

1930	URUGUAY
1934	ITALY
1938	ITALY
1950	URUGUAY
1954	WEST GERMANY
1958	BRAZIL
1962	BRAZIL
1966	ENGLAND
1970	BRAZIL
1974	WEST GERMANY
1978	ARGENTINA
1982	ITALY
1986	ARGENTINA
1990	WEST GERMANY
1994	BRAZIL
1998	FRANCE
2002	BRAZIL
2006	ITALY
2010	SPAIN

GOLDEN BOOT WINNERS

1930	Guillermo Stabile	(Uruguay)	8
1934	Oldrich Nejedly	(Czech)	5
1938	Leonidas da Silva	(Brazil)	7
1950	Ademir	(Brazil)	8
1954	Sandor Kocsis	(Hungary)	11
1958	Just Fontaine	(France)	13
1962	Florian Albert	(Hungary)	4
	Valentin Ivanov	(Soviet Union)	4
	Garrincha	(Brazil)	4
	Vava	(Brazil)	4
	Drazan Jerkovic	(Yugoslavia)	4
	Leonel Sanchez	(Chile)	4
1966	Eusebio	(Portugal)	9
1970	Gerd Muller	(West Germany)	10
1974	Grzegorz Lato	(Poland)	7
1978	Mario Kempes	(Argentina)	6
1982	Paolo Rossi	(Italy)	6
1986	Gary Lineker	(England)	6
1990	Toto Schillachi	(Italy)	6
1994	Oleg Salenko	(Russia)	6
	Hristo Stoichkov	(Bulgaria)	6
1998	Davor Suker	(Croatia)	6
2002	Ronaldo	(Brazil)	8
2006	Miroslav Klose	(Germany)	5
2010	Thomas Muller	(Germany)	5

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Del Bosque in the hunt..again

THERE was a time when returning from the Americas with plundered treasure and a trail of vanquished opponents was a way of life for the Spanish.

However, if Spain's modern day incarnation of the conquistadors wish to return from Brazil this summer with gold in tow they will have to do something never before achieved.

In seven attempts in the history of the tournament, no European country has ever won the World Cup on the other side of the Atlantic.

Plenty have come close, with Czechoslovakia (in Chile 1962), Italy (Mexico '70 and USA '94), Holland (Argentina '78) and West Germany (Mexico '86) all reaching the final, but none have managed to take that winning step.

On top of that, no nation, European or otherwise, has

By Mike Perez

ever won four successive major tournaments, which is what Spain would do if they emerge victorious on July 13.

Throw in the fact that the holders have been handed one of the toughest groups and could possibly meet hosts Brazil in the second round, and you can see the mighty challenge awaiting Vicente del Bosque's 'Golden Generation' this summer.

"We know how difficult it is to play in the World Cup and also, right from the start, with the group we have been handed," said playmaker Xavi, whose side must face Holland, Chile and Australia in Group B.

Holland were Spain's opponents in the last World Cup final, while Chile are ranked 13th in the world – above the Dutch – and almost claimed Spain's scalp, only to be denied by a late Jesus Navas equaliser in a 2-2 draw.

Spain will, therefore, have to do it the hard way if they are to defend their crown.

However, meeting challenges and overcoming them has become a hallmark of this record-breaking Spain group over the last eight years, and it would be a brave man to bet against them in Brazil.

Since November 2006, La Furia Roja have only lost three competitive matches while winning back-to-back European Championships and their maiden World Cup – becoming the first country ever to win three major tournaments in succession.

They have risen to the top of the FIFA rankings, equalled the world record of 35 successive unbeaten matches and seen David Villa become the nation's record goalscorer.

This squad has also produced nine of the 12 most capped Spanish players of all time – most of whom have either already passed 100 appearances or could have done by the end of the World Cup.

Those statistics speak volumes about why Spain have been as successful as they have, with Del Bosque and predecessor Luis Aragones able to stick with the same core of players for nearly a decade.

All good things must come to an end, though, and while Spain have plenty of promising young talent that should ensure they remain near the top of the pile in the future, this could be the last World Cup for many of their golden oldies.

The likes of Iker Casillas, Xavi, Xabi Alonso, Andres Iniesta, Fernando Torres and Villa are all in their 30s and approaching the twilights of their international careers.

If this is to be their swansong, though, all of them will be determined to go out on a high, with 32-year-old Alonso saying: "After three consecutive titles and against the competition of the other teams, it will be difficult to win the World Cup. But, honestly, whatever happens this generation to deserves to finish with dignity, with all the honours.

"Probably some players will leave the team after the World Cup. Footballers who have had very long careers. All that's missing is that this finishes well, so that they can go out with their heads held high. We don't want to experience the same story as France in the 2002 World Cup. Because that was really sad."

It seems unlikely that fate – where Les Blues, the defending champions, were embarrassingly eliminated after finishing bottom of their group with just one point and no goals from three games – awaits this all-conquering Spain group. But whether they can return from South America with more honours, records, glory and gold remains to be seen.

SPAIN

Coach Vicente Del Bosque
Tasted victory in 70 of his first 84 matches in charge, the 63-year-old is also the only coach to have won the Champions League, European Championship and World Cup.

Star man
Xavi (Barcelona)
At 34, the veteran schemer is approaching the end of his career, but his razor-sharp football brain and unparalleled passing remain undiminished.

One to watch
Andres Iniesta (Barcelona)
Unpretentious but deadly, Iniesta is effective in any number of attacking positions, great with both feet and equally adept at creating goals or scoring them.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1934	Quarter-finals
1950	.4th place
1962	1st round
1966	1st round
1978	.1st round
1982	2nd round
1986	Quarter-finals
1990	Round of 16
1994	Quarter-finals
1998	1st round
2002	Quarter-finals
2006	Round of 16
2010	WINNERS

FIFA ranking 1
Stan James odds 6-1

Costa to add killer touch to tika-taka

YOU know you must be doing something right if you are at the centre of a tug-of-war between five-time World Cup winners Brazil and reigning European and world champions Spain.

That is the situation Diego Costa found himself in last year, as two of the big favourites for this summer's global showpiece battled for his services.

Brazil were the first to make their move for their home-grown striker, giving him two friendly appearances at the start of 2013.

However, it was Costa's adopted nation of Spain – where he had been playing his club football for six years – that ultimately won his allegiance and he made his debut for La Furia Roja in February's friendly against Italy.

Physical, direct, polemical and abrasive, Costa is not your identikit modern Spain player, but the in-form Atletico Madrid forward could be just the X-factor the holders may need to unlock opposition defences who have become wise to their 'tiki-taka' passing.

That is an opinion shared by Atletico coach Diego Simeone, who said: "He's a big boost for the Spanish team, because he's different to the other strikers. He's going to cause a surprise with Spain."

A successful World Cup would cap a stunning year for the 25-year-old that has seen him spearhead Atletico's bid for the Primera Division and Champions League double, scoring more than 35 goals in all competitions.

It has undoubtedly been the best season of what had been a relatively slow-burning career, until the last few years and helped catapult Costa into the very top bracket of strikers.

However, while Costa's star is high now, it has not been an easy journey to get to this point. And it could have turned out very differently, but for an incident that happened three years ago.

Following several spells away from Atletico of mixed success, he was deemed surplus to requirements at the Rojiblancos, who he first joined from Portuguese side Braga in 2007.

Having only shown glimpses of his potential at the Vicente Calderon, the talented but temperamental Costa looked set to be sold to a Turkish club in the summer of 2011 when, just prior to a Europa League qualifier against Stromsgodset, he tore the ligaments in his right knee during training.

Costa recalled: "My agent called me to go to Turkey because the club had accepted an offer. I went to training and I suffered the injury. It was very serious.

"I believe in God. We have a destiny, good and bad, and everyone plays it out. I had to start again from zero."

Costa had been dealt a cruel blow, but the battle to get fit brought out the best in him. After undergoing surgery and spending six months on the sidelines, Costa joined Atletico's local rivals Rayo Vallecano on loan, and it was there that the striker showed what he could do.

He scored four times in his first three games and ended up with 10 goals in 16 appearances. Impressive though that was, it still did not earn him a place in Atletico's plans.

"The coach told me he didn't count on me. I understood and I trained," said Costa. "My life has always been to fight and battle. It's something I have inside."

Perhaps Costa's never-say-die attitude is the reason he is recovering from another injury in time to play.

It had looked as though the footballing gods were against him again when his chances of appearing in Brazil were thrown into doubt during Atletico's title triumph at Barcelona.

The striker limped off with a recurrence of a hamstring injury early on and, although he missed the club's Champions League final with Real Madrid, he should recover in time for the start of the World Cup.

Having won Simeone over, he established himself as one of Europe's rising talents last season.

With international recognition and a big-money move in the pipeline, things could hardly be going better for Costa, but Simeone believes there is still more to come.

"He decides his limit. He must never forget what it's taken to become this player," said the Argentinian.

"We're all convinced he is a player who still has much room to grow."

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CHILE

Coach Jorge Sampaoli
Brought in to rekindle the embers of Marcelo Bielsa's team that impressed in 2010. A Bielsa disciple, he marries together an aggressive pressing game with a fluid attack-in-numbers style.

Star man
Alexis Sanchez (Barcelona)
After overcoming niggling injuries, Sanchez was back to his best at Barcelona this season with an impressive goal tally, including his first hat-trick for the club against Elche in January.

One to watch
Arturo Vidal (Juventus)
Combative in defence and creative in attack, Vidal is an all-action box-to-box midfielder who is known as Il Guerriero – 'The Warrior' – at Juventus.

How they qualified
Third, South America

World Cup record

1930	1st round
1950	1st round
1962	3rd place
1966	1st round
1974	1st round
1982	1st round
1998	Round of 16
2010	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 13
Stan James odds 40-1

NETHERLANDS

Coach Louis van Gaal
A Champions League, Bundesliga and La Liga winner at club level, the 62-year-old is in his second spell with the Oranje and will be keen to go out with a bang.

Star man
Robin van Persie (Man Utd)
Considered the main reason Manchester United won their 20th title in 2013, Van Persie was the leading scorer in European qualification, netting 11 times as the Netherlands ran away with their group.

One to watch
Jeremain Lens (Dynamo Kiev)
A versatile striker who can play anywhere across the front line, Jeremain Lens could prove to be a great foil for Robin van Persie.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1934	1st round
1938	1st round
1974	Runners-up
1978	Runners-up
1990	Round of 16
1994	Quarter-finals
1998	4th place
2006	Round of 16
2010	Runners-up

FIFA ranking 15
Stan James odds 28-1

AUSTRALIA

Coach Ange Postecoglou
Following chastening defeats to France and Brazil in the past year, not many will envy the Greece-born 48-year-old as he attempts to make Australia a force to be reckoned with.

Star man
Tim Cahill (New York Red Bull)
His best days may be behind him, but the former Millwall and Everton man is still capable of catching defenders off guard, with his aerial ability a particular strength.

One to watch
Mitch Langerak (Borussia Dortmund)
Thrown in at the deep end following Chelsea goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer's sudden international retirement.

How they qualified
Asia group runners-up

World Cup record

1978	1st round
2006	Round of 16
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 59
Stan James odds 1500-1

Chile revive spirit of Bielsa

EXPECTATIONS in Chile are as high as they have ever been – and rightly so.

Four years ago in South Africa, La Roja earned many plaudits for their style of football. The 2010 side were the work of highly-influential Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa, who took a group of promising young players – semi-finalists in the 2007 World Youth Cup – and stamped his own personality all over them.

They pressed high, maintained a free-flowing tempo and sought to create two-against-one situations in the wide areas, a legacy that current coach Jorge Sampaoli has revived.

Their approach made them the neutrals' favourites, and their brand of football is likely to enchant a global audience again this summer.

Alexis Sanchez embodies Chile's transition. Ahead of the finals in South Africa, Sanchez was regarded as a hot prospect who was just beginning to make an impact in Serie A with Udinese.

Barcelona saw his promise and now the Spanish giants have one of the world's most exciting forwards.

In Juventus' Arturo Vidal, Chile have one of the best and arguably the most complete midfielders in the world, while Gary Medel has displayed his combative qualities for Cardiff this season.

With marauding right-back Mauricio Isla getting forward, Marcelo Diaz directing the build-up from deep and Eduardo Vargas adding a goal threat, Chile can be an irresistible spectacle.

Orange prize for friction

Can the Dutch keep it together this time?

"COULD this be the Netherlands' year?" That is one of the most-asked questions whenever a major tournament comes around.

Once it was, in the 1988 European Championship, but for all their talent it is not much of a return.

Usually they have only had themselves to blame for failing on the biggest stage, with a fractious camp full of cross-purpose egos causing them to break down.

It is hard to see Louis van Gaal allowing dissent to rule in Brazil, though and, if his side's qualifying campaign is anything to go by, they are worthy of being among the favourites. They ended with a haul of 28 points from a possible 30, with their only dropped points coming in a 2-2 draw in Estonia. They also scored 34 in 10 games, but qualifying well is nothing new. Where the Dutch struggle is converting their talented squad into a tangible reward at the tournament.

In 2010 they went closer than they had done since 1978, making the final for a third time, losing out to Spain after a bloody battle.

A trio of runners-up spots seems scant return for a nation which has produced players such as Bergkamp, Cruyff, Gullit, Kluivert, Sneijder, Van Basten and Van Der Sar, to name but a few.

Van Gaal will certainly hope to be the man who makes it all work in Brazil and it would be fitting if he did. One of the stand-out coaches of the last two decades, he is heading back to club management when the tournament is over.

He knows, too, that for all his achievements at domestic level, success with his country has evaded him. He left the job after failing to qualify for the 2002 World Cup, but the way he turned the squad around following the no-win flop of Euro 2012 suggests he might have a better chance this time around.

If his methods work, Robin van Persie fires and Wesley Sneijder is on his game, who knows what could happen?

The absence of Kevin Strootman will hurt them badly, but it could be now or never for this group of players.

Aussie fears in Group of Death

AUSTRALIA were made to work hard before sealing their third successive appearance at a World Cup finals, but their luck has been on a downward slope ever since.

Only the most optimistic of fans will have hopes of them emerging from the 'Group of Death' in Brazil.

The Socceroos have become leading contenders in the Asian Football Confederation, and sealed one of the four automatic qualification spots, although that was only guaranteed in their final group game when striker Josh Kennedy struck seven minutes from time in a 1-0 win over Iraq.

But it has been largely forgettable since. A run of four defeats in the second half of last year, including back-to-back 6-0 thrashings in Brazil and France, led to the removal of Holger Osieck as coach after three years at the helm.

He was replaced by double A-League winner Ange Postecoglou, and his competitive bow will be a baptism of fire after they were drawn with both 2010 finalists, Spain and Holland, and dark horses Chile.

In Tim Cahill and Mark Bresciano, they have seasoned campaigners who have competed at the top level and have led Australia's charge for much of the last decade, and they hope talented youngsters Tom Rogic and James Holland will play a vital part in the next generation. They have graced the Champions League this season with Celtic and Austria Vienna respectively.

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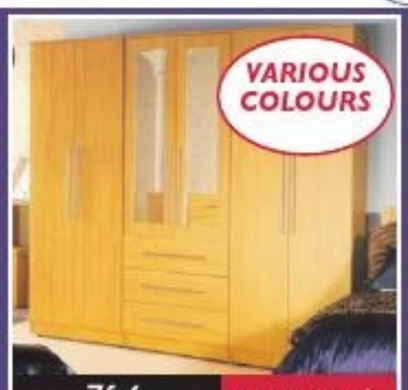

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Tricolor trouble

By Andrew McDermott

COLOMBIA are back at the World Cup after a 16-year absence, but are still reeling from the absence of star striker Radamel Falcao.

Widely regarded as one of the best players in the world, the Monaco frontman has failed to recover in time from a knee injury.

Jose Pekerman described the reluctant decision to leave the 28-year-old out of his final squad as "the saddest day I've had since becoming Colombia coach".

Colombia must now prove they are more than a one-man team.

Los Cafeteros made three successive World Cup tournaments in the 1990s when they were able to call upon the likes of flamboyant goalkeeper Rene Higuita, unmistakable midfielder Carlos Valderrama and enigmatic forward Faustino Asprilla. They have failed to replace such larger-than-life characters – until now. With experienced figures Mario Yepes, Cristian Zapata and Fredy Guarin complemented by blossoming talents such as James Rodriguez, there is hope they can go far.

Incredibly, one member of their 1998 squad will again be on duty in Brazil. Goalkeeper Farid Mondragon turns 43 during the tournament and will become the oldest ever World Cup player if he is called upon. Colombia's road to Brazil showcased both their attacking talent and defensive resolve.

Pekerman's Tricolor battered Uruguay 4-0 and demolished Bolivia 5-0, while holding Argentina to a goalless draw. Arguably their most impressive result was the point which clinched their World Cup berth as they rallied from three goals down to draw 3-3 with Chile.

The ecstasy which greeted that result in October turned to despair three months later when Falcao, who had scored more than 70 goals in the previous two seasons with Atletico Madrid, injured a knee, and the team already have their excuse if they fail.

But for a nation whose World Cup history is sadly linked with tragedy, after defender Andres Escobar was murdered following his own goal in 1994, Colombia could provide an uplifting story.

COLOMBIA

Coach Jose Pekerman
Coached Argentina in 2006 when they went out in the last eight. Has a track record of developing the next generation, and is the man who gave Lionel Messi his international debut.

Star man
James Rodriguez (Monaco)
Seen as Colombia's creative force and brightest young talent. Had a highly successful stint at Porto before a 45 million euros move to Monaco.

One to watch
Adrian Ramos (Hertha Berlin)
Colombia will look to the 28-year-old for goals now Radamel Falcao is out.

How they qualified
Africa play-off winners

World Cup record

1982	1st round
1986	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 5
Stan James odds 28-1

James Rodriguez will have to take on Radamel Falcao's mantle in Brazil

Zac's aces could set finals alight

JAPAN were the first nation to qualify for the finals and this stylish team appears to be brimming with confidence under their veteran Italian coach, Alberto Zaccheroni.

It will be Japan's fifth successive appearance, and they were within a penalty shootout loss to Paraguay of reaching the quarter-finals last time in South Africa.

A repeat is no certainty, but it is well within Japan's reach, and former AC Milan manager Zaccheroni has his sights on making a big impact. "Just qualifying is not enough," he said. "We will aim even higher in Brazil."

Japanese football has been smitten with Zaccheroni since he instructed local media to "call me Zac" when he succeeded Takeshi Okada after South Africa 2010.

Progress from the preliminary group was laboured, but fourth place at London 2012 restored the Blue Samurais' poise and resounding wins over Oman and Jordan got the final qualifying stage off to a wonderful start, Jordan dispatched 6-0 on the back of a Keisuke Honda hat-trick. Jordan would earn a surprise return win, meaning Japan needed a repeat of their draw with Australia earlier in the phase to progress.

They got just that and now, led by Zaccheroni, Honda, Shinji Kagawa, Shinji Okazaki and Yasuhito Endo, Japan could prove to be one of the hottest tickets in town.

JAPAN

Coach Alberto Zaccheroni
The former AC Milan manager has moulded an ambitious attacking unit around the talents of Shinji Kagawa and Keisuke Honda.

Star man
Keisuke Honda (AC Milan)
The heir to Hidetoshi Nakata and Shunsuke Nakamura, Honda is a playmaker with game-changing ability that can lift his country to a new level.

One to watch
Shinji Kagawa (Man Utd)
Made his name in Jurgen Klopp's brilliant Dortmund side, but has had limited chances at Manchester United.

How they qualified
Asia group winners

World Cup record

1998	1st round
2002	Round of 16
2006	1st round
2010	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 47
Stan James odds 150-1

Drogba ready to lead a final fling

THIS summer's World Cup presents perhaps the final chance for Ivory Coast's golden generation to make their presence felt on the biggest stage.

French coach Sabri Lamouchi will oversee a vastly talented group, spearheaded by Galatasaray striker Didier Drogba and Manchester City midfield powerhouse Yaya Toure.

Yet they have not gone beyond the group stage at a World Cup, and nor does possibly the most talented group ever assembled from their continent have an African Cup of Nations win.

The problem now is that Drogba and Toure, along with the latter's elder brother Kolo, Didier Zakora, Emmanuel Eboue and enigmatic goalkeeper Boubacar Barry, are all in their 30s.

Younger attacking talents such as Wilfried Bony, Seydou Doumbia and Lacina Traore show the production line is still working, but they will do well to outshine those they will ultimately replace.

Former Chelsea man Salomon Kalou is another vital cog and, now enjoying a new lease of life at Lille, it was the 28-year-old who scored in both legs of the 4-2 play-off win that saw Ivory Coast book their finals place at Senegal's expense.

IVORY COAST

Coach Sabri Lamouchi
A student of Jose Mourinho's, Lamouchi is a managerial rookie after a distinguished playing career with Inter Milan, Monaco and Marseille.

Star man
Yaya Toure (Man City)
An accomplished holding player with Barcelona, Toure has transformed into an all-action midfield powerhouse at Manchester City.

One to watch
Wilfried Bony (Swansea)
Viewed by some as the long-term heir to Drogba, and goes into the World Cup on the back of a good season.

How they qualified
Africa play-off winners

World Cup record

2006	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 21
Stan James odds 150-1

Santos' Greeks tough to crack

IT is a decade since Greece stunned the rest of Europe by winning the Euro 2004 in Portugal, courtesy of a string of 1-0 wins – but anyone under-estimating them at this World Cup could again do so at their peril.

Today's Greece is built on the same strong defensive foundations as the class of 2004. They conceded only four times in their 10 qualifying games en route to Brazil, keeping a remarkable eight clean sheets.

However, after missing out on top spot to Bosnia-Herzegovina on goal difference, Fernando Santos' men needed to see off Romania in a play-off, which they did 4-2 on aggregate.

Borussia Dortmund star Sokratis Papastathopoulos is at the heart of that stingy unit which, as they famously did in Portugal, appears to have mastered the art of narrow victories.

Midfielders Georgios Karagounis and Konstantinos Katsouranis have well over 200 caps between them and can pass on a wealth of knowledge to their younger team-mates.

Up front, both Konstantinos Mitroglou and Georgios Samaras have enjoyed prolific spells at club level in ther time.

Greece are hoping that they can now progress to the knockout stage at the third time of asking. Once there, as they proved 10 years ago, anything is possible.

GREECE

Coach Fernando Santos
The Portuguese is well-versed in Greek football having taken charge of AEK Athens, Panathinaikos and PAOK before succeeding Otto Rehhagel.

Star man
Georgios Karagounis (Fulham)
A central midfielder who plays with his heart on his sleeve, Karagounis is his country's captain and record cap-holder.

One to watch
Konstantinos Mitroglou (Fulham)
Grabbed the goals to qualify with three in the two-legged play-off victory over Romania.

How they qualified
Europe play-off winners

World Cup record

1994	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 10
Stan James odds 200-1

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Ecuador bid to honour Benitez's memory

THE World Cup will be tinged with sadness for Ecuador, who will play in the memory of striker Christian Benitez after he tragically died during the qualifying campaign.

Benitez, known as Chucho by his team-mates, passed away last June aged 27 following a cardiac arrest he suffered shortly after moving to Qatar to play for El Jaish.

He had been a key player in earning La Tricolor's place at the tournament with four goals in qualifying and Ecuador retired his No.11 jersey as a mark of respect.

With the motivation of honouring the 58-time capped striker (pictured), Ecuador go into the tournament aiming to improve on their best performance to date, when they reached the last 16 at Germany 2006.

They were knocked out by England after beating Poland and Costa Rica, but their experience of the testing conditions in South America make them tricky opponents.

Their draw looks favourable on paper and it could be the most open group in the competition, giving Reinaldo Rueda's men a real chance of progress.

Seven qualifying home wins and a draw with Argentina in Quito made sure of their place in the draw, with former Manchester City, Malaga and now Al-Jazira forward Felipe Caicedo leading the goalscoring charts with seven.

Can Karim finally rise to the top?

IF France are to fulfil their potential, Karim Benzema will have to do likewise.

Coach Didier Deschamps has favoured a 4-3-3/4-5-1 hybrid formation, with Benzema as the focal point, supported by Franck Ribery and Mathieu Valbuena.

That will place fierce scrutiny on a man going into his first World Cup, and whose fluctuating confidence makes him unpredictable.

Benzema scored nine minutes into his debut, against Austria in 2007, and has 19 goals in 65 caps.

But he went 16 months without an international goal before he finally found the net in last October's 6-0 friendly win over Australia.

He only scored once in qualifying, but added a half-volley in March's friendly win over Holland, admitting: "A few months ago, it might have gone over the bar."

Benzema's performance in that 2-0 win impressed Deschamps, who said afterwards: "When he plays at that level it is great for us. Let's hope he can keep it up. You can see it on his face. He is beaming and that is because he is confident."

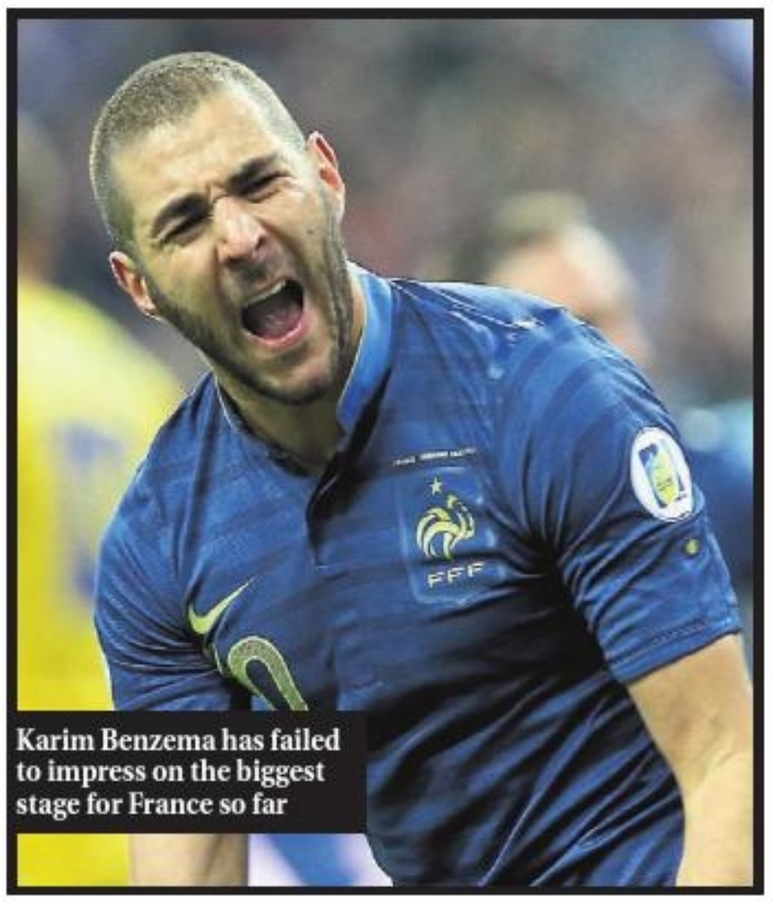
Having been left out of France's wretched 2010 campaign in South Africa, Benzema will be desperate to seize his chance.

His record in European championships is far from impressive, having failed to score in six appearances.

And having been dropped in favour of Arsenal's Olivier Giroud during qualifying and with Loic Remy, who excelled on loan at Newcastle, also in contention, the 26-year-old will know there is no margin for error this time around.

Transfer speculation surrounds him, and Giroud could even be a future club-mate, with the Gunners linked with a possible bid.

A stellar performance in Brazil could increase both the fee and his prospective salary should Real opt to cash in.



Karim Benzema has failed to impress on the biggest stage for France so far

FRANCE

Coach Didier Deschamps
Captained France to victory in 1998, and now aims to emulate Franz Beckenbauer in lifting the trophy as manager and player.

Star man
Franck Ribery (B Munich)
Champions League winner in 2013, he was third in the 2013 Ballon D'Or behind Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

One to watch
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)
Despite struggling to match club form for his national team – scoring only once in seven qualifying games – the 26-year-old has the qualities to trouble any defence.

How they qualified
Europe play-off winners

World Cup record

1930	1st round
1934	1st round
1938	Quarter-finals
1954	1st round
1958	3rd place
1966	1st round
1978	1st round
1982	4th place
1986	3rd place
1998	WINNERS
2002	1st round
2006	Runners-up
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 16
Stan James odds 22-1

Swiss seeds are ready to bloom

VETERAN coach Ottmar Hitzfeld will hope the youthful verve of his Switzerland squad can provide one last hurrah in his much-decorated career.

Hitzfeld, whose honours include Champions League triumphs at the helm of German giants Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich, is set to retire at the end of the competition, bringing down the curtain on an excellent six-year period with the Swiss national team.

Having suffered the humiliation of elimination at the group stage of Euro 2008, despite being co-hosts, Switzerland turned to Hitzfeld in the aftermath.

It paid instant dividends as they topped their 2010 World Cup qualifying group and went on to send shockwaves through the game with a 1-0 triumph over Spain in their opening game, when Gelson Fernandes' goal saw off the European champions and eventual winners.

It proved a relatively false dawn, as Switzerland failed to progress from the group stage and fell short in qualification for Euro 2012.

But Hitzfeld's men left little doubt that lessons had been learned with an emphatic march to Brazil, topping UEFA Group E with 24 points from 10 unbeaten games in their qualifying group.

Switzerland were both ruthlessly efficient and easy on the eye in qualification, with seasoned performers such as Tranquillo Barnetta, Gokhan Inler and Philippe Senderos providing a solid, established core that allowed exciting youngsters Xherdan Shaqiri, Granit Xhaka, Fabian Schar and Valentin Stocker to flourish.

Bengston sets his sights on a first for Honduras

HONDURAS arrive in Brazil on a journey of rejuvenation four years on from their appearance in South Africa.

Their 2010 World Cup campaign ended in disappointment, with Los Catrachos failing to win a single game or score a goal, but the appointment of Luis Fernando Suarez in March 2011 accelerated an upward trajectory.

After a respectable quarter-final appearance at the 2012 London Olympics, Honduras blended a mix of youth and experience for the CONCACAF qualifiers.

They topped round three in preliminary qualifying ahead of Panama and, in round four, easily made it to Brazil by finishing third, four points ahead of Mexico.

Their home form claimed the scalps of both the United States and Costa Rica, who finished first and second respectively, while a 2-2 draw at home to Mexico was earned by goals from Carlo Costly and Jerry Bengtson.

The most famous result for Honduras, though, came in the return fixture. Trailing 1-0 at half-time, Bengtson and Costly struck again to earn Honduras an historic win. The defeat was only the second at home for Mexico in 78 World Cup qualifying matches.

Results like that will give Honduras confidence in Group E, but they will have to do something they did not manage in 1982 or 2010 – win a World Cup match. With the likes of Bengtson and Costly in goalscoring form, they go with confidence.

ECUADOR

Coach Reinaldo Rueda
Colombia-born Rueda took charge in 2010 after four years with Honduras, in which time his former charges qualified for the previous World Cup in South Africa.

Star man
Antonio Valencia (Man Utd)
Former El Nacional youth and Wigan winger joined Manchester United in 2009 and won the club's player-of-the-year award three years later.

One to watch
Felipe Caicedo (Al-Jazira)
The 25-year-old left-footed striker was Ecuador's top scorer in World Cup qualifying and is versatile in that he can also play in the middle or on the wing. A full international since 2005.

How they qualified
Fourth, South America

World Cup record

2002	1st round
2006	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 28
Stan James odds 150-1

SWITZERLAND

Coach Ottmar Hitzfeld
Elder statesman of European football bringing down the curtain on a stellar career. Led both Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich to Champions League glory.

Star man
Gokhan Inler (Napoli)
Experienced midfielder is captain and heartbeat of his national team. A superb striker of the ball, he has a taste for the spectacular when given the chance to let fly.

One to watch
Xherdan Shaqiri (B Munich)
Had a brief taste of World Cup action in 2010 as an 18-year-old. Not a regular starter for Bayern Munich so should arrrive fresh and with a point to prove.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1934	Quarter-finals
1938	Quarter-finals
1950	1st round
1954	Quarter-finals
1962	1st round
1966	1st round
1994	Round of 16
2006	Round of 16
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 8
Stan James odds 120-1

HONDURAS

Coach Luis Fernando Suarez
Suarez has managed to mix youth and experience to great effect since taking charge in 2011 and guided Honduras to the Olympic quarter-finals in London two years ago.

Star man
Jerry Bengston (New England Revolution)
Has proven international pedigree, scoring three goals at London 2012 and he also netted crucial goals home and away against Mexico in qualifying.

One to watch
Emilio Izaguirre (Celtic)
The left-back already has World Cup experience having played in South Africa in 2010, which earned him a move to Scottish giants Celtic.

How they qualified
Third, Concacaf

World Cup record

1982	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 30
Stan James odds 3000-1

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Messi's chance to join greats

By Matt Hardisty

LIONEL MESSI will be facing up to a new type of pressure when he lines up for Argentina against Bosnia and Herzegovina on June 15 at the Maracana.

For almost a decade, the eyes of the world have fallen on the man from Rosario as he dazzled everyone as the talisman of a Barcelona side who dominated club football.

Since making his debut in 2004, Messi has won three Champions League titles, six Primera Division titles and the Ballon d'Or for four consecutive years from 2009 to 2012.

Messi is not 27 until June 24, the day before Argentina face Nigeria in their final Group F game in Brazil.

But despite achieving all that before the age that most of us mere mortals are working out what we want to do, never mind being the best at it, the crown is beginning to slip in the eyes of some.

This year, the Ballon d'Or, the title given to the player regarded as the best in the world, was handed to Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo.

Two months on the sidelines from November until January this season did not help his cause and Messi was without a League goal in open play from September until February, including an almost unheard of run of four games without scoring either side of his injury.

That led to some criticism in Spain and even led Barca coach Gerardo Martino to leap to the defence of his star man, saying: "Those that are negative do not realise they are affecting his pride. When you do that to the world's best player, this is what happens."

Back-to-back hat-tricks against Osasuna and Real Madrid were the high point of a return to normal service before seemingly lacklustre performances against Atletico Madrid in the Champions League quarter-finals and Real in the Copa del Rey final.

So is Messi coming into this World Cup out of form? Hardly. His goals-to-games ratio this season is around one to one, a drop-off from the past two years, but that fact just shows what sort of level Messi is operating on.

Imagine if Wayne Rooney had been scoring at that pace for Manchester United this season. In the minds of many English fans, the bunting would already be up, the champagne on ice and England on their way to a certain World Cup victory.

The Argentina captain must know this tournament in Brazil offers him the chance to join the ranks of the true greats of the game.

Many already regard him to be in the same bracket as Pele and Diego Maradona but, for some, only a win on the very biggest stage will catapult him into that company.

It is easy to see why that is, as many of the players who sit just below Pele and Maradona in the all-time hierarchy do not have a World Cup to their name.

Being Northern Irish meant George Best never had the chance to compete for the sport's greatest prize, while Johan Cruyff was at the epicentre of a Dutch team which brushed all before them aside on the way to the 1974 final before being defeated by West Germany.

Messi was the beating heart of Argentina's team in South Africa four years ago and earned himself a Golden Ball nomination on their run to the quarter-finals, but crucially failed to score.

Now he travels to Brazil knowing leading his country to World Cup glory would raise him from the level of one of the best there has ever been to the very top table.

Pele. Maradona. Messi? We may find out on July 13.

ARGENTINA

Coach Alejandro Sabella
Although not the popular choice to succeed Sergio Batista in August 2011, the former Sheffield United and Leeds United midfielder has already won over many of his critics.

Star man
Lionel Messi (Barcelona)
Spectacular goalscoring feats mark him out as the outstanding player of his generation. The winner of four successive Ballon d'Or awards, his ability to run with the ball and change direction at top speed is unparalleled. Has lifted the game to new heights at Barcelona.

One to watch
Ezequiel Garay (Benfica)
The defender has emerged as a towering presence during qualifying and has played a key role in their transformation into genuine contenders.

How they qualified
First, South America

World Cup record

1930	Runners-up
1934	1st round
1958	1st round
1962	1st round
1966	Quarter-finals
1974	2nd round
1978	WINNERS
1982	2nd round
1986	WINNERS
1990	Runners-up
1994	Round of 16
1998	Quarter-finals
2002	1st round
2006	Quarter-finals
2010	Quarter-finals

FIFA ranking 7
Stan James odds 4-1

Many believe Lionel Messi has to win a World Cup before he can be considered equal among Pele and Diego Maradona

Can Sabella make up for lost time?

By Matt Hardisty

ALEJANDRO SABELLA and Diego Maradona could not be a great deal more different.

At the 2010 World Cup in South Africa the larger-than-life Maradona, as he had been for over 30 years, was the figure that dominated Argentinian football.

The country's greatest ever player was now the head coach and, despite having the man regarded as the best player on the planet at the time with Lionel Messi in his side, the media circus was still very much about Maradona.

Argentina exited in the quarter-finals and Maradona's contract was not renewed, ending a controversial two-year spell at the helm.

There is little chance of controversy in Brazil under Sabella as the man who has spent the bulk of his career flying under the radar attempts to lead his country to glory.

Sabella began his playing career in 1974 with River Plate before moving to England and Sheffield United after the Blades failed in an audacious bid to sign Maradona. A single season at Leeds followed before a return home and five years playing for Estudiantes, the club he would go on to manage almost 25 years later. In fact, Sabella did not get his first big break in management until he went back to his former club in 2009, but it could never be said that he had not earned his stripes.

> "One of his first moves was to make Messi skipper"

Following his retirement from playing in 1989, Sabella began to work under Daniel Passarella and formed a relationship that would see him coach in his native Argentina, Uruguay, Italy, Mexico and Brazil.

The eight-cap international never played in a World Cup, but he found himself on the biggest stage in 1998 when, as part of Passarella's staff, he was with the national team. Argentina got through the group stage without conceding but, after dispatching England on penalties in the last 16, lost to Holland as Dennis Bergkamp scored one of the most memorable goals the competition has ever seen.

It would be 11 years before Sabella got his chance back at the club where he won two League titles, but he took no time in making an impact once he arrived, guiding them to Copa Libertadores and Apertura wins before leaving in February 2011.

That summer he was due to take up a post in the Middle East but, following Argentina's quarter-final exit in the Copa America, manager Sergio Batista was dismissed and Sabella had the biggest job in Argentinian football.

One of his first moves was to make Messi his captain with many believing the Barcelona playmaker had flattered to deceive when playing for his country. The skipper rewarded his boss with 10 goals in 16 games as Argentina topped the Conmebol standings to ease their way to Brazil 2014.

Messi's flourishing could be the key this summer as he takes the spotlight off his boss – a coach who took his time to become a manager but could quite possibly be on the brink of winning the biggest prize in football.

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Bosnian fans celebrate in Sarajevo after the win over Lithuania that secured their first qualification for the World Cup finals

Fiery Dragons

Susic's Bosnians ready to make an impact

By Andrew McDermott

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA'S passage to the World Cup already represents a remarkable achievement for a country that only played its first FIFA-recognised international in November 1995.

After two qualifying campaigns for international tournaments had previously ended in play-off agony, the Dragons booked their place in Brazil after topping their qualifying group, edging out Greece on goal difference.

It was an overdue success after their previous narrow disappointments.

During qualifying for the 2010 World Cup, Bosnia-Herzegovina finished second behind Spain in their group after scoring an impressive 25 goals – just three less than the eventual champions.

Edin Dzeko finished joint second in the European goalscoring charts with nine goals, but failed to replicate that form in the play-offs when they were defeated 2-0 on aggregate by Portugal.

Their free-scoring football and attacking verve continued in qualifying for Euro 2012, where they outscored everybody in their group, but the pressure of expectation weighed heavily.

The Dragons went to the Stade de France knowing a win in the final game would ensure they finished above the hosts in first position.

Despite dominating much of the game and taking the lead through Dzeko, nerves and fatigue contributed to a late Samir Nasri penalty, consigning Bosnia-Herzegovina to the play-offs once more. Drained by that disappointment, they eventually succumbed 6-2 to Portugal after a goalless first leg. There was to be no repeat in qualification for Brazil 2014, though. Pushed all the way by Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina held their nerve against Lithuania in the final game to win 1-0 through a Vedad Ibisevic goal.

It was done with the type of sweeping football that much of Europe had become aware of.

The Dragons plundered 30 goals in qualifying, with Ibisevic, Dzeko and their leading appearance-maker, Zvjezdan Misimovic, all scoring, while conceding only six at the other end.

With the emergence of Roma's Miralem Pjanic, the experience of Emir Spahic in defence and a reliable keeper in Stoke's Asmir Begovic performing solidly in the Premier League, there is no reason why they cannot make an impact on their debut at the finals.

Canny Keshi can make Eagles soar

AFTER failing to reach the second round in each of their past two World Cup appearances, Nigeria head to Brazil looking to prove how far they have come in the past four years.

In 2010 in South Africa, the Super Eagles picked up just one point from their three games and finished bottom of their group, but a lot has changed since then.

Under the stewardship of Stephen Keshi, who was Nigeria's captain at their first ever World Cup finals in 1994, the Super Eagles won the Africa Cup of Nations last year and they are in a good position to go further than ever before.

Since taking the helm at the end of 2011, Keshi has broken the mould by picking lesser known, home-based players ahead of those who play in Europe and this strategy has given a huge boost to the national team.

The likes of Godfrey Oboabona and Sunday Mba, who were both playing their club football in the Nigeria Premier League when they triumphed in last year's Africa Cup of Nations, excelled at the tournament and did not look out of place alongside household names such as Chelsea duo John Obi Mikel and Victor Moses.

The Super Eagles reached the last 16 of the World Cup in both 1994 and 1998, but have since struggled on the world stage.

After becoming African champions and going unbeaten in the qualifying campaign for Brazil, though, Nigeria's confidence is sky high.

Although the squad contains a large number of young players, the Super Eagles have some experienced heads in their ranks. Lille keeper Vincent Enyeama is used to major tournaments, having played in goal for his country in South Korea and Japan in 2002 and in South Africa four years ago, while Mikel has played in plenty of big games for Chelsea.

The experience of these players will be vital if the Super Eagles are to make a splash in Brazil.

Queiroz's high hopes

IRAN make the trip to Brazil for their fourth World Cup finals and their brief is clear – better what they have done before.

On those previous occasions, progress beyond the group stage has not materialised but this time, after an excellent qualifying campaign, hopes are higher.

Iran finished top of their Asian qualifying group, winning five of their eight games and conceding only two goals along the way. Those numbers are a credit to coach Carlos Queiroz, who has given a sense of belonging on the international stage. The well-travelled Portuguese has coached at two of the world's leading clubs in Manchester United and Real Madrid and has made his mark with Iran, as the 100,000 fans who bore witness to their vital 1-0 qualifying win over South Korea would testify.

Queiroz scouted Charlton striker Reza Ghoochannejhad when he was at Standard Liege and he scored the vital goals as Iran booked their passage to South America.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Coach Safet Susic

When Miroslav Blazevic left in 2009, there was a fear his inspiration would go, but Susic has kept a flamboyant style and the Bosnians have top-scored in two qualifying campaigns.

Star man
Edin Dzeko (Man City)

Despite not always being a first-choice striker at Manchester City, 'the Bosnian Diamond' is his country's talisman, with a goalscoring record of one in less than every two games.

One to watch
Miralem Pjanic (Roma)

The talented Roma playmaker is deadly at set-pieces, and his creative spark is key to creating the chances needed for Dzeko to shine.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record
First appearance since independence from Yugoslavia

FIFA ranking 25
Stan James odds 150-1

NIGERIA

Coach Stephen Keshi

Twenty years after captaining Nigeria at their first World Cup finals, Keshi will attempt to take the Super Eagles to new heights when he returns to the greatest show on earth as a manager.

Star man
John Obi Mikel (Chelsea)

A powerful midfielder with great experience at both club and international level, Mikel plays in a more advanced position for his national side than he does for Chelsea.

One to watch
Ogenyi Onazi (Lazio)

A fast defensive midfielder with a strong challenge. Strength and awareness help him to break teams down before turning defence into attack.

How they qualified
Africa play-off winners

World Cup record

1994	Round of 16
1998	Round of 16
2002	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 44
Stan James odds 250-1

IRAN

Coach Carlos Queiroz

Few coaches at the tournament have a CV to match that of Queiroz, the former right-hand man of Sir Alex Ferguson and, in his own right, boss of both Real Madrid and Portugal.

Star man
Reza Ghoochannejhad (Charlton)

The goals of Ghoochannejhad – known as Gucci – were key to qualification, scoring three in successive games, including winners against Qatar and South Korea.

One to watch
Ashkan Dejagah (Fulham)

Having played for Germany at every age level between 17 and 21, he opted to play for Iran and scored twice on his debut against Qatar in 2012.

How they qualified
Asia group winners

World Cup record

1978	1st round
1998	1st round
2006	1st round

FIFA ranking 37
Stan James odds 1500-1

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Gotze has spark to fill Hass void

By Ben Gladwell

THINK of Thomas Hassler and you are not that far away from the blueprint for Germany's latest creative talent.

The pint-sized midfielder who inspired Germany to their last two major titles – the 1990 World Cup and Euro 96 – had proved a tough man for the German national side to replace following his retirement in 2000 – until, that is, Mario Gotze came exploding on to the scene.

Most at home when operating in the space behind two strikers, Gotze has shot to prominence since coming through the Borussia Dortmund youth academy, emerging as an inspirational figure for the yellow and blacks and also for Germany's youth sides.

Comparisons with the 101-times capped Hassler were always likely to happen as his star continued to rise – but some have gone further, with Gotze even being placed in the same bracket as the best player of his generation.

"He's the German Messi," Germany's two-time World Cup winner Franz Beckenbauer once said. "He has the same understanding and technique, and he's a footballer who acts purely on his instincts – just like Messi.

"It's impossible to stop Mario Gotze. He just strolls through as if there are no opponents."

Dortmund were unable to stop Gotze either when Bayern Munich stumped up the full value of his release clause – 37 million euros – last summer. Gotze was lured back home to Bavaria where the prospect of working under Pep Guardiola was cited as one of his main motivations. Under the Catalan, he hoped to develop in a similar way Messi had at Barcelona, ensuring that not only Beckenbauer would be drawing those parallels in future.

An injury picked up in the semi-final of last year's Champions League, which ruled him out of the final against Bayern, also saw him miss the start of the 2013/14 campaign.

Since returning in October, though, he quickly made up for lost time. In just 20 Bundesliga starts, Gotze netted 10 goals and laid on a further 10. He created almost a century of chances for his team-mates, becoming one of the exceptions to Guardiola's rotation policy.

Bayern without Gotze is as unimaginable now as Germany without their most resourceful asset. His flexibility means he can also play as the 'false nine' frequently preferred by Joachim Low, a position similar to Messi's at Barca.

The 2014 World Cup is a stage for him to draw yet more favourable comparisons with the four-time world player of the year, but in his head the motivation will not be to become the second Messi – but the first and only Gotze.

Mario Gotze has drawn comparisons with Thomas Hassler (inset) and even Lionel Messi

GERMANY

Coach Joachim Low
The former Stuttgart and Fenerbahce boss has tactical awareness and man-management skills to rival any coach, but only a World Cup triumph is good enough.

Star man
Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich)
A mainstay for a decade and with a good goal tally, his range of passing and unrivalled vision make him a huge threat to opposition defences.

One to watch
Julian Draxler (Schalke)
Midfielder whose stock has risen with mesmerising Champions League performances. Linked with Arsenal and Manchester United.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1934	3rd place
1938	1st round
1954	WINNERS
1958	4th place
1962	Quarter-finals
1966	Runners-up
1970	3rd place
1974	WINNERS
1978	2nd round
1982	Runners-up
1986	Runners-up
1990	WINNERS
1994	Quarter-finals
1998	Quarter-finals
2002	Runners-up
2006	3rd place
2010	3rd place

FIFA ranking 2
Stan James odds 6-1

Cool customer Low has final hurdle to overcome

JOACHIM LOW may not have won a trophy as Germany manager, yet he has already become one of the most revered managers in the history of the Nationalmannschaft.

Having emerged from his shell, with the results he has delivered managing to speak louder than any of the words he would whisper on his first appearances in the media spotlight, Low has developed a character which has endeared him to the nation while enhancing his 'cool' reputation after a series of near-misses.

Behind his laid-back demeanour, though, hides a man who is not afraid of making unpopular choices. Michael Ballack's career came to a less-than-ideal end thanks to Low, while Kevin Kuranyi soon found out to his expense that questioning the national team coach's selections was hardly the brightest career move – he never represented his country again after refusing to sit in the stands for a friendly international. However, Low only needs to refer to his successes in charge to back up his choices, although he is still not the type to boast about his achievements. Far from it. The softly-spoken 54-year-old, who fronts advertising campaigns for Nivea, does not quite come across as the bragging type.

He began his coaching career with Stuttgart in the Nineties. There, he paid for being too humble and nice.

Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder – also the man who appointed Low as Germany's assistant coach six years later – was president of the Swabians at the time and was never so keen on Low's overly-sympathetic approach to coaching. Low's own prediction that he would not last long proved accurate and he thus packed his bags and toured Europe, gaining valuable experience in cities from Istanbul to Innsbruck, winning the Austrian league in the latter. Any thoughts of him one day occupying the hottest seat in German football were distant, until 2004.

> "Low needs to prove he is able to take that final step"

Low was happy to play an anonymous role behind Jurgen Klinsmann's more charismatic lead, but it soon became clear who was calling the shots in Germany football's most powerful double act. When the current USA manager decided to flee the nest, Low was the logical successor.

It took time for Low to adapt to being in the limelight. No longer was he just doing the hard work behind the scenes. He now had to present his findings to the press. Initially at least, that proved his biggest challenge.

After his now-customary espresso, the coffee-loving Low soon settled into his stride, developing a unique style in front of the camera. At the 2010 World Cup, as much debate was given to his choice of pullover as it was to his team's tactics. "I think it's a bit exaggerated at times," admitted Low. "Especially when I get labelled a fashion icon."

Given the heat in Brazil, Low will have to dispense of his pullover and sport a more casual look, and perhaps the focus will then return to what he is ultimately paid to do – lead Germany back to the zenith of world football. For him to succeed, he needs to shake off one final misconception – that he is unable to take that decisive final step.

Germany came up agonisingly short in their last three tournaments, reaching the Euro 2008 final, but losing out to Spain and Italy in semi-finals in 2010 and 2012.

Low has since committed until 2016, but Germany now expects.

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USA

Coach Jurgen Klinsmann
Klinsmann will be hoping to defy all odds in becoming only the third man in history to win the World Cup both as a player and a manager when he takes his USA team to Brazil.

Star man
Clint Dempsey (Seattle Sounders)
As the all-time highest American goalscorer in English football, Dempsey is one of the USA's most experienced stars having spent six years in the Premier League.

One to watch
Julian Green (Bayern Munich)
Former Germany Under-19 winger could be the youngest ever player to represent the United States at a World Cup.

How they qualified
First, Concacaf

World Cup record

1930	Semi-finals
1934	1st round
1950	1st round
1990	1st round
1994	Round of 16
1998	1st round
2002	Quarter-finals
2006	1st round
2010	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 14
Stan James odds 200-1

PORTUGAL

Coach Paulo Bento
Took over from from Carlos Queiroz in 2010 and guided Portugal to the semi-finals of Euro 2012 in his first major tournament. Had four years in charge of Sporting Lisbon.

Star man
Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid)
Head and shoulders above his team-mates in terms of talent and star quality, he will aim to prove he is the best player of his generation in Brazil.

One to watch
Luis Neto (Zenit St Petersburg)
Made his full international debut for Portugal only last year, and could add some much-needed youth to an ageing defence.

How they qualified
Europe play-off winners

World Cup record

1966	3rd place
1986	1st round
2002	1st round
2006	4th place
2010	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 3
Stan James odds 30-1

GHANA

Coach Kwesi Appiah
Became the first black African coach to qualify for a World Cup finals after his side's 7-3 play-off victory over Egypt, with the achievement coming at his first attempt in charge.

Star man
Michael Essien (AC Milan)
Injury may have slowed him down, but Essien remains a hard-hitting, all-action player. Starred for Chelsea and Real Madrid before his move to Serie A with AC Milan.

One to watch
Emmanuel Agyemang Badu (Udinese)
Still only be 23, but Agyemang Badu already has over 40 caps to his name, having made his debut as a 17-year-old.

How they qualified
Africa play-off winners

World Cup record

2006	Round of 16
2010	Quarter-finals

FIFA ranking 38
Stan James odds 150-1

Jurgen's winning habit to lift US

THE USA's history at the World Cup has not exactly been steeped in success – the North Americans' biggest achievement came more than 80 years ago when they finished third at the 1930 finals in Uruguay.

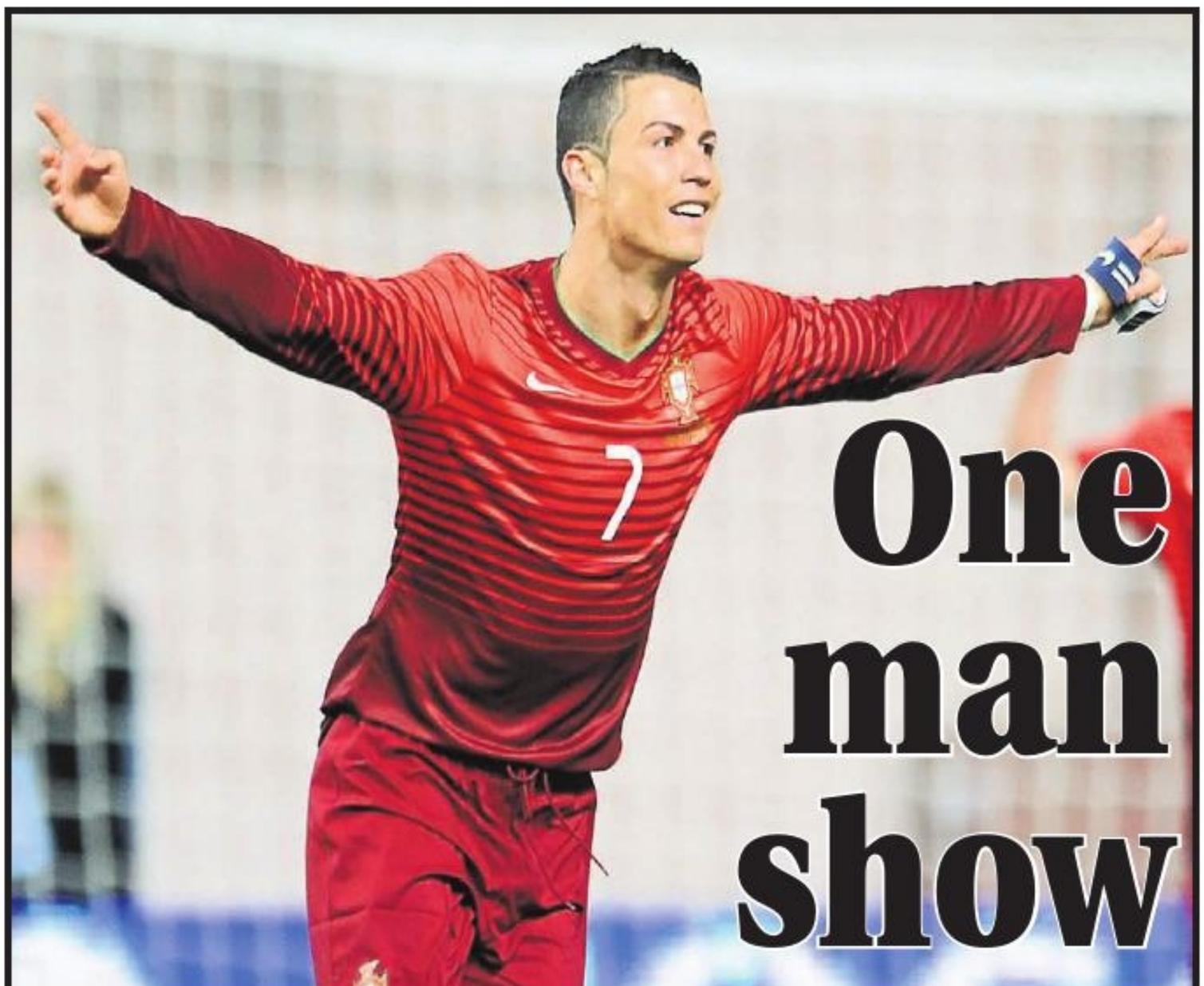
Despite not qualifying for the tournament between 1954 and 1986, Team USA have progressed to the knockout rounds three times since, reaching the quarter-finals in 2002 before going out to Germany.

The Stars and Stripes squad boasts such well-known names as Everton keeper Tim Howard and former Tottenham striker Clint Dempsey – although Landon Donovan was a surprise omission– but their biggest weapon could lie in the form of head coach Jurgen Klinsmann, who enjoyed a glittering career as a player.

The former striker was a World Cup winner in 1990 while, at club level, he won the UEFA Cup, Bundesliga title and German Footballer of the Year award, among others.

Goals from Eddie Johnson and Donovan during a 2-0 win against Mexico in September 2013 ultimately secured USA a place in Brazil, but Klinsmann's men will know poor performances such as the ones during qualifying defeats to Jamaica and Costa Rica will need to be avoided if they are to progress to the round of 16 and beyond.

Realistically, USA will do well to go beyond the group stages ahead of Germany and Portugal, but Klinsmann and his squad can raise a few eyebrows in Brazil.



One man show

Ronaldo to lap up limelight on biggest stage

PORTUGAL claimed their place at the finals thanks in no small part to a stellar performance from one man – Ballon d'Or winner, Cristiano Ronaldo.

The 29-year-old Real Madrid superstar scored a hat-trick in Portugal's play-off victory over Sweden to ensure he, and his countrymen, would have the chance to shine on the world stage this summer.

Portugal had lost only once on the road to Brazil, but a second-placed finish behind Russia meant they entered the play-offs against Sweden, where Paris Saint-Germain striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic almost put them to the sword.

Ronaldo had scored a crucial late winner in the first leg to give Portugal a slender advantage before firing the opener in the return clash in Solna, before the imposing Ibrahimovic netted twice in four second-half minutes to throw the tie wide open.

With the weight of a nation's expectation resting on his shoulders, Ronaldo scored two more to claim a hat-trick, a ticket to Brazil and equal Portugal's all-time leading goalscorer Pauleto on 47.

Ronaldo is therefore Portugal's star attraction going into the tournament, but he does have some talented sidekicks.

Joao Moutinho, who plies his trade at Ligue 1's Monaco, shone at Euro 2012 when Portugal reached the semi-finals, while Fenerbahce midfielder Raul Meireles has the experience of winning the Champions League title with Chelsea along with 70 caps for his country. There is also Manchester United winger Nani, a wily campaigner who is the perfect foil for Ronaldo.

Portugal have a good chance of qualifying in the top two ahead of the US and Ghana.

Their best ever finish came in 1966 – the year that England's Bobby Moore lifted the Jules Rimet trophy – when Portugal finished in third place after Eusebio led them to a semi-final defeat to the eventual champions.

Portugal also finished in fourth place in 2006 when the golden generation of Luis Figo, Nuno Gomes, Rui Costa, Fernando Couto and Paulo Sousa all starred for their country.

Paulo Bento is now in charge, and if he is able to get the best out of his star man Ronaldo, Portugal could go far.

Gyan to make up for his howler?

GHANA were one of the stand-out stories of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. The tournament was a billed as a celebration of African football and the Black Stars certainly came to the party, missing out on the semi-finals by the most upsetting of margins.

Luis Suarez's handball on the line and Asamoah Gyan's subsequent penalty kick against the crossbar denied them a spot in the semi-finals and, as a legacy, they are sure to have the neutral's support in Brazil.

This will be their third World Cup in a row and, after becoming just the third African country to make the quarter-finals last time out, they will no doubt be ready for more.

Gyan recovered from that miss – he actually fluffed a penalty twice during that tournament – and was the joint leading scorer in African qualifiers with six goals. The former Sunderland man is currently playing in the United Arab Emirates so may not be at his sharpest, but a lot will rest on him.

Ghana's qualifying campaign suggested they are in good shape, with Zambia, Lesotho and Sudan swept aside before their emphatic victory against a well-regarded Egypt side, with their 6-1 win in the first leg of the play-off a huge shock.

What may work against them this time around is that in 2010 they were expected to do little, whereas they will be paid more attention in Brazil.

However, they have the tools to make a name for themselves all over again.

LATEST HONDURAS BETTING: 3000/1*
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Foxes to upset the odds again?

ALGERIA will be North Africa's only representatives at the finals, but Vahid Halilhodzic's side have proved they are more than capable of causing an upset on the big stage.

The Desert Foxes had the away-goals rule to thank for their passage to Brazil after a hard-fought contest with Burkina Faso. Now they will be hoping for an even bigger rub of the green if they are to progress to the knockout stages for the first time.

Algeria caused one of the biggest World Cup upsets of all on the first day of the 1982 tournament – their debut in the competition – when they beat reigning European champions West Germany.

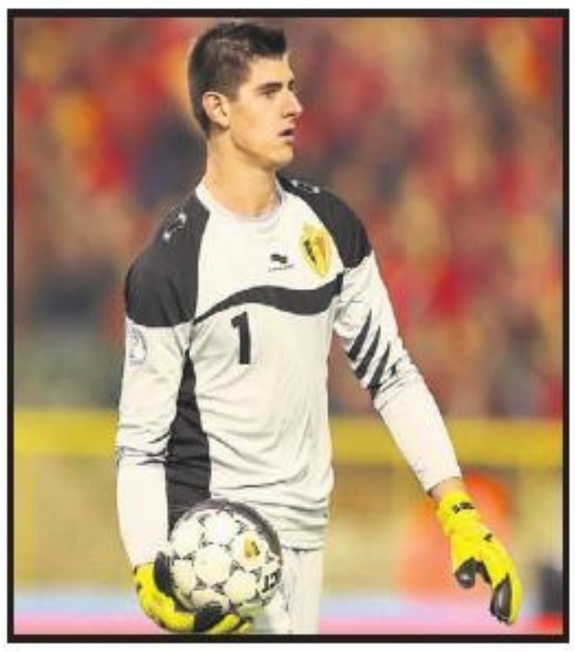
The result was ultimately overshadowed when Algeria, who were relying on West Germany to beat Austria by a heavy margin, watched the two sides play out a cynical 'friendly' after Horst Hrubesch's early goal meant both teams would progress at the cost of the Algerians.

Four years ago Algeria were drawn against England, the United States and Slovenia. Although they finished bottom of the group with a single point, their draw with England led to celebrations throughout the world's Algerian communities.

Their qualifying ties with Burkina Faso sparked similar celebrations, with the Greens clinching a 1-0 win to secure their place at the 2014 World Cup finals.

Halilhodzic's charges will meet Belgium in their opening tie before coming up against South Korea and Russia.

Golden generation is ready to dazzle



Chelsea's Thibaut Courtois has been a rock in goal for Belgium and during his loan with Spanish champions and Champions League finalists Atletico Madrid

ARGUABLY one of the most exciting sides in the tournament after finishing nine points clear at the top of their qualification group, it is little wonder Belgium are creating such a buzz.

Led by Marc Wilmots, many believe Belgium are equipped to eclipse the achievements of the Red Devils last 'golden generation' that reached the semi-finals of the 1986 World Cup.

Wilmots certainly has the talent available to rival the likes of Jean-Marie Pfaff, Jan Ceulemans and Enzo Scifo, and after an impressive eight wins in 10 matches during qualifying, it is easy to see why the current squad are being touted as successors to some of those greats.

Belgium's squad is rooted in the Premier League, where 12 of the 22 players used in qualification play. Among them are Manchester City and national captain Vincent Kompany, Everton duo Romelu Lukaku and Kevin Mirallas, and Chelsea's star man Eden Hazard, while Liverpool goalkeeper Simon Mignolet is back-up to the impressive Thibault Courtois.

Hazard's stock at Stamford Bridge rose further last term with a string of impressive performances. The midfielder was on target in their 6-0 and 4-0 demolitions of Arsenal and Tottenham respectively.

Lukaku, who was loaned to West Brom by Chelsea in the 2012-13 season, thrived again away from his parent club, joining Everton for the last campaign. He was also on target twice against Croatia as Belgium recorded a 2-1 win to secure their place in Brazil.

Guillaume Gillet (Anderlecht) and Ilombe Mboyo (Genk) were the only Belgian-based players used in qualifying by Wilmots.

BELGIUM

Coach Marc Wilmots
Belgium's leading World Cup goalscorer netted 28 times in 70 appearances. Started his managerial career with Schalke, one of his former clubs.

Star man
Eden Hazard (Chelsea)
Chelsea's £32million man has won the Europa League since his move. He is PFA young player of the year and was nominated for the main award.

One to watch
Kevin Mirallas (Everton)
Given a new lease of life following the arrival of Roberto Martinez at Everton, becoming a regular scorer and provider in their fine season.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1930	1st round
1934	1st round
1938	1st round
1954	1st round
1970	1st round
1982	2nd round
1986	4th place
1990	Round of 16
1994	Round of 16
1998	1st round
2002	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 12
Stan James odds 20-1

Angry Capello has a point to prove

RUSSIA will aim to make up for lost time in Brazil when they play in their first finals since 2002.

The country will host the tournament itself in four years' time so it is important for Fabio Capello's side to get Russia buzzing by delivering a Euro 2008-style performance.

On that occasion, the Russians reached the semi-finals as Roman Pavlyuchenko and Andrei Arshavin took centre stage. Both struggled to build on their performances in Austria and Switzerland and were victims of Capello's overhaul of the Russia squad following a poor showing at Euro 2012.

The experienced coach admitted he was angry at his abrupt end to his spell as England boss and quickly showed he meant business when he was handed another opportunity. Ditching star names paid off for Capello, who delivered on his promise to guide Russia to the 2014 finals. His side topped a group containing Portugal as they scored 20 and conceded only five goals in 10 games.

Reaching the last 16 would be Russia's best performance at a World Cup since they became an independent nation in 1992. They were knocked out in the group stage in 1994 and 2002, and Capello has targeted the quarter-finals.

ALGERIA

Coach Vahid Halilhodzic
Scorer of more than 200 goals in 388 appearances in a career that included spells with Nantes and Paris Saint-Germain, Halilhodzic led Ivory Coast to the 2010 World Cup.

Star man
Madjid Bougherra (Lekhwiya)
The versatile Bougherra cemented his place in the nation's sporting history when his goal against Burkina Faso sealed Algeria's passage through to Brazil 2014.

One to watch
Nabil Bentaleb (Spurs)
Despite representing France at Under-19 level, he pledged his future to Algeria earlier this year. Broke through at Spurs during the past season.

How they qualified
Africa play-off winners

World Cup record

1982	1st round
1986	1st round
2010	1st round

FIFA ranking 25
Stan James odds 1500-1

RUSSIA

Coach Fabio Capello
Has an impressive managerial record including trophy-laden spells with AC Milan, Real Madrid and Roma, although his reputation was hit by England's dismal showing in 2010.

Star man
Aleksandr Kerzhakov (Zenit St Petersburg)
Experienced striker who has been prolific in two spells for Zenit St Petersburg, which have come either side of successful stints with Sevilla and Dynamo Moscow.

One to watch
Alan Dzagoev (CSKA Moscow)
Attacking midfielder who ended Euro 2012 as joint-top goalscorer despite Russia failing to get past the group stage.

How they qualified
Europe group winners

World Cup record

1958	Quarter-finals
1962	Quarter-finals
1966	4th place
1970	Quarter-finals
1982	2nd round
1986	Round of 16
1990	1st round
1994	1st round
2002	1st round

FIFA ranking 18
Stan James odds 80-1

SOUTH KOREA

Coach Hong Myungbo
No player has represented South Korea more than Hong. He made 136 appearances for his country and appeared at four World Cup finals, bowing out after the 2002 tournament.

Star man
Son Heung Min (Bayer Leverkusen)
The versatile forward has been a star of the Bundesliga in recent seasons, firstly for Hamburg and more recently for Bayer Leverkusen.

One to watch
Koo Jacheol (Mainz)
The versatile midfielder captained the 2012 Olympic team and scored as South Korea beat Japan 2-0 to claim a bronze medal.

How they qualified
Asia group runners-up

World Cup record

1954	1st round
1986	1st round
1990	1st round
1994	1st round
1998	1st round
2002	4th place
2006	1st round
2010	Round of 16

FIFA ranking 55**Stan James odds** 300-1

Legend Hong on the attack

SOUTH KOREA made tough work of their qualifying campaign, but should head to Brazil in high spirits under the leadership of national legend Hong Myungbo.

The former defender captained the Taeguk Warriors as they reached the semi-finals on home soil in 2002 before leading the men's Olympic team to bronze at London 2012 as coach.

He took over from Choi Kanghee in June 2013 after South Korea scraped through their final group by virtue of a single goal, following two draws with Uzbekistan and a pair of defeats by Iran.

The 45-year-old was tasked with making the side more solid while also increasing its attacking threat.

There have been wins against Switzerland, who went through qualifying unbeaten, Costa Rica and Greece, all sides that will join them in Brazil this summer.

Hong may wish he had 2002 team-mates Park Ji-Sung, Lee Woon-Jae and Lee Young-Pyo at his disposal, but what he has is a group of young players eager to become national heroes.

Much will depend on Hong Jeong-ho in the heart of defence, one which Ki Sung-yueng will look to protect. Son Heung-min, Koo Ja-cheoland Kim Bo-kyung will be the men to supply chances for strikers Park Chu-young and Ji Dong-won.

Hong is optimistic his squad can cause a shock. "I'm expecting my boys to go into the competition bursting with confidence," said the veteran of four tournaments. as a player.

LATEST ITALY BETTING: 25/1*
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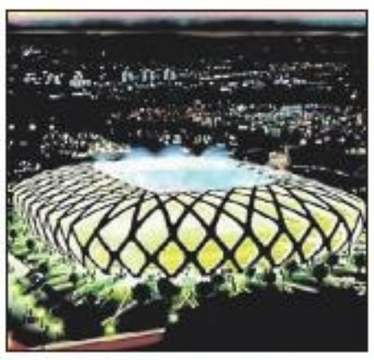
Your guide to the 12 venues around Brazil that will host the football carnival

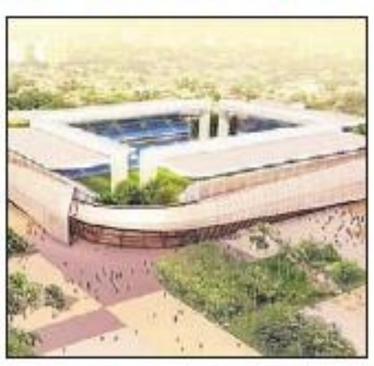


Arena Amazonia, Manaus
capacity: 42,374
Bang in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, where humidity can reach 99 per cent during June and July.

Arena Fonte Nova, Salvador
capacity: 52,048
Salvador hosts six games in a new complex featuring a museum of football, shops, hotels and a concert hall.

Estadio Castelao, Fortaleza
capacity: 58,704
Fortaleza is famous for tourism, beautiful beaches, delicious seafood and a unique carnival.

Estadio das Dunas, Natal
capacity: 42,086
Completely rebuilt, the stadium's most remarkable feature is its roof, designed in the shape of petals.



Arena Pantanal, Cuiaba
capacity: 42,968
Just south of the Amazon rainforest, but still humid and temperatures can go above 40 degrees centigrade.

Estadio Nacional Mane Garrincha, Brasilia
capacity: 68,009
Named after former Brazil star Garrincha, an icon of the 1950s and 1960s teams.

Arena Pernambuco, Recife
capacity: 44,248
A newly-built stadium home to three historic Brazilian clubs, Nautico, Santa Cruz and Sport.

Arena da Baixada, Curitiba
capacity: 41,456
Originally built in 1914, but underwent refurbishment in 1999 and once again for this World Cup.

Estadio Mineirao, Belo Horizonte
capacity: 57,483
Venue for one of the semi-finals, and where Ronaldo began his career with the Cruzeiro club.

Estadio Beira-Rio, Porto Alegre
capacity: 48,849
Located on the banks of the River Guaiba, the Estadio Beira-Rio is home to Internacional and Gremio.

Arena Corinthians, Sao Paulo
capacity 65,000
Venue for the opening match in a city known as Terra da Garoa (Land of Drizzle) because of persistent rain.

Maracana, Rio de Janeiro
capacity 73,531
Arguably the most iconic stadium in world football, the rebuilt Maracana will host the final on July 13.

LATEST IRAN BETTING: 1500/1*
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QUIZ

1 Which World Cup has produced the highest average attendances?

2 Name the highest-scoring final and what was the score?

3 Which country has reached three finals without winning one?

4 Name the English referee who famously showed Croatian defender Josip Simunic three yellow cards before sending him off in their match with Australia in the 2006 finals.

5 Who is England's top goalscorer in World Cup finals?

6 Which country is making its World Cup debut this summer?

7 Name the only CONCACAF nation to reach a semi-final.

8 Which nation won the World Cup the last time it was hosted in South America?

9 Who were the only nation to remain unbeaten throughout the 2010 World Cup in South Africa?

10 Which country famously beat then-world champions Argentina – led by Diego Maradona – in the first group stage at Italia 90?

ANSWERS

1. USA 1994 (68,991); 2. Brazil 5-2 Sweden, 1958; 3. Netherlands, 1974, 1978, 2010; 4. Graham Poll; 5. Gary Lineker (10); 6. Bosnia & Herzegovina; 7. USA (1930); 8. Argentina (Argentina, 1978); 9. New Zealand; 10. Cameroon.

4-1 Argentina to spoil Brazil's Maracana party

Argentina's Sergio Aguero can rain on Brazil's parade

BETTING by Rory Jiwani of Stan James

HOSTS Brazil kick off the World Cup against Croatia with the expectations of a nation on their shoulders.

Luiz Felipe Scolari led Brazil to glory 12 years ago and he is tasked with delivering a home triumph.

'Big Phil' is the old hand guiding an inexperienced squad, many of whom have not played in a World Cup. Much depends on Neymar in attack and, while they are favourites, we are happy to lay them at a top price of 3-1.

Second favourites are neighbours Argentina, with Lionel Messi finally replicating his Barcelona heroics in the national team under coach Alejandro Sabella.

Add either Sergio Aguero or Gonzalo Higuain and you have the most potent attack in the competition. Benfica's Ezequiel Garay is one of the best defenders playing in Europe and there is experience throughout the squad. They have an easy group and we are keeping them on side at 4-1.

FAVOURITES

Brazil	3-1
Argentina	4-1
Germany	6-1
Spain	6-1
Belgium	20-1
France	22-1
Uruguay	22-1
Italy	25-1

Four teams dominate the betting with holders Spain and Germany both 6-1. Despite winning their last three major tournaments, Spain have been easy to back this year and were as big as 7-1 in March. They have been supported since and Brazilian-born striker Diego Costa could see them shelve the 'false nine' position employed two years ago. I like their chances, but they are an ageing squad whose players had tough domestic campaigns.

When Germany reached the semi-finals four years ago, it seemed experience was all they needed to go further in the future. But their defence looks shaky and they may have to start with veteran Miroslav Klose up front. Joachim Low's men drifted from 5-1 to 6-1 in recent weeks and that striker shortage could stop them going all the way.

Belgium are the best of the rest at 20-1, but a lack of major tournament nous makes them unlikely winners. France should cruise through their group, but Germany await in the quarter-finals. Uruguay have been popular, but they are no certainties to get out of Group D with Italy and England for company.

What of England? For a change, there is little pressure on the Three Lions and Roy Hodgson has picked a squad with an eye on the future. They are 4-7 to reach the last 16 and a top price 11-8 for an early flight home. Colombia or Japan in round two look beatable, but a likely clash with Brazil in the last eight makes 7-2 about a quarter-final exit look tempting.

Spain and Argentina are scheduled to meet in the semi-finals and I fancy the latter to edge through before defeating Brazil in the Maracana final.

We have winning nation/top goalscorer double betting and our 14-1 about Messi and Argentina looks a decent bet.

Argentina and Belgium should score plenty in their groups so 7-1 favourite Messi and Romelu Lukaku each-way at 33-1 would be my idea of top goalscorer bets.

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Cowley £295,000

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Cowley £195,000

This GROUND FLOOR flat offers spacious accommodation with SECURITY ENTRANCE, fitted kitchen, spacious lounge/dining room, TWO DOUBLE BEDROOMS, bathroom. DOUBLE GLAZING and gas central heating. EPC Awaited.

Cowley £375,000

his solid 1930's semi detached has been EXTENDED to the side and rear offering SPACIOUS FLEXIBLE accommodation having five bedrooms, two reception rooms, cloakroom, utility room, recently installed bathroom suite plus a separate shower cubicle. EPC Awaited

Greater Leys £220,000

This WELL PRESENTED Bovis built TWO BEDROOM mid terraced property offers the good sized FITTED KITCHEN/DINING ROOM with the separate LOUNGE, upstairs has master bedroom plus EN-SUITE SHOWER, second bedroom with white bathroom suite. EPC Awaited

Cowley £275,000

OPEN HOUSE SATURDAY 31ST MAY: Set in a desirable side road within the ring road is this 1930's home offering a wealth of original features. Set in a well sized plot, requires modernisation. NO ONWARD CHAIN. EPC Rating: G

Littlemore £305,000

This EXTENDED end terraced property offers SPACIOUS LIVING ACCOMMODATION on the ground floor being open plan with SOLID OAK flooring throughout. THREE BEDROOMS and REPLACEMENT WHITE BATHROOM SUITE. Parking and GARAGE in a block. Located in a quiet cul de sac. THIS IS A MUST VIEW. EPC Rating: C

Blackbird Leys £240,000

Family home with a CONSERVATORY close to local amenities. The home comprises of a sitting room, fitted kitchen/dining room, conservatory, THREE BEDROOMS and a family bathroom, rear garden. EPC Rating: D

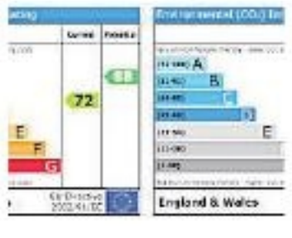
Cowley £315,000

Offered to the market with NO ONWARD CHAIN is this much improved three bedroom home, benefitting from re-fitted first floor bathroom, lounge, kitchen diner, drive way, SOUTH FACING GARDEN.

Cowley £250,000

Being sold with vacant possession this THREE BEDROOM terraced property with ample OFF STREET PARKING to the front. Fitted kitchen, lounge/dining room, boiler/side room, landing, three bedrooms, bathroom, separate toilet, REAR GARDEN. EPC Rating: D

Blackbird Leys £210,000



Offering VACANT POSSESSION this THREE bedroom terraced with the benefit of OFF STREET PARKING and GARAGE. Entrance, CLOAKROOM, kitchen, reception one and two, landing, three bedrooms and bathroom. EPC Rating: C

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Oxford
£600,000

Originally constructed as Two Cottages, this fabulous Cottage is situated in the highly desirable village of Horspath, offering convenient access to Oxford City and the Oxford Tube Bus Route. The property offer Four Good Bedrooms, Three Generous Reception Rooms and Double Garage.

Horspath
Oxford
£575,000

Allen and Harris are delighted to present this spacious five bedroom chalet bungalow in the highly sought after village of Horspath. As well as a beautiful garden with views over rolling countryside the excellent links to the many historical attractions and shopping opportunities Oxford city centre.

Spring Lane
Headington
£500,000

A modern four/five bedroom detached family home situated within the ever desirable Quarry Conservation area. The property is within the Wheatley School Catchment area.

Wheately
Oxford
£450,000

Situated in the desirable village of Wheatley, which offers excellent access to Oxford City and the A/M40 for transportation links to the wider area. This extremely well proportioned modern detached family residence offers Three Reception Rooms, Four Bedrooms, Two Bathrooms and Cloakroom and Garage.

London Road
Wheatley
£325,000

A Detached Three Bedroom Bungalow, situated in a private road in the Village of Wheatley. The property requires refurbishment and has the potential to extend on what is already a good sized footprint (subject to the necessary planning constraints).

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Nowell Road
OXFORD
£232,500

A good sized three bedroom mid-terraced property which has been refurbished to an excellent standard throughout. Situated in this popular location the property has three good sized bedrooms, three reception rooms and large garden to the rear.

Hunsdon Road. Iffley Borders
Oxford
£350,000

OPEN HOUSE SAT 7th JUNE BETWEEN 1PM-2PM.A great sized property with fantastic potential for development subject to the normal consents. Situated in the highly sought after and popular location on the Iffley boarders this three bedroom property has been modernised throughout. NO ONWARD CHAIN.

Marlborough Close, Littlemore
Oxford
£245,000

OPEN DAY 14TH JUNE BETWEEN 11AM 12PM. A well presented two bedroom mid-terraced property situated in this highly sought after and popular cul-de-sac location in Littlemore. With a good sized garden, parking and a garage.

Rose Hill
Oxford
£485000

A beautifully presented extended three bedroom detached property situated in this highly sought after and popular location. Extended to the rear and providing exceptional living space this property is not to be missed.

SPENCER CRESCENT
Oxford
£237,500

A newly refurbished three bedroom semi-detached property with off road parking and enclosed private rear garden, lounge, kitchen. The property has been well maintained throughout and to arrange a viewing please call 01865 711441. NO ONWARD CHAIN

Birch Road, Garsington
£275,000

OPEN HOUSE 10th MAY BETWEEN 11AM-1PM Presented to the market is this well presented detached bungalow situated on Birch Road in Garsington. NO ONWARD CHAIN

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Sudoku

Place a number from 1 to 9 in each empty cell so that each 3x3 block, column, and full row includes each of the numbers from 1 to 9 only once. **EASY/MEDIUM/HARD**

4					8	2		5
	3		2	1		4		
	7	6	3					9
				9	6	1	5	4
		8				7		
9	1	4	5	3				
3					5	9	6	
		7		6	2		8	
1		9	7					2

6	4							7
				6	5		8	
9	1				7			3
	2				4			
	9	7				2	1	
			7				3	
2			4				6	1
	5		6	7				
7							5	2

			2		8			1
4		5				7		
	1	3						
	6			9				
7			3		1			8
				6			9	
						5	6	
		8				3		4
1			9		5			

Two speed crossword

Quick Clues Across

4 Allow (6)
8 Transporter (7)
9 List of things to be done (6)
10 Afflict (9)
11 Halt (4)
13 Spirited horse (5)
14 Long loose overcoats (7)
16 Discourse (7)
18 Live piece of coal (5)
19 Crude metals (4)
21 Office of foreign power (9)
22 Crown (6)
23 Brown coal (7)
24 Settle comfortably (6)

Quick Clues Down

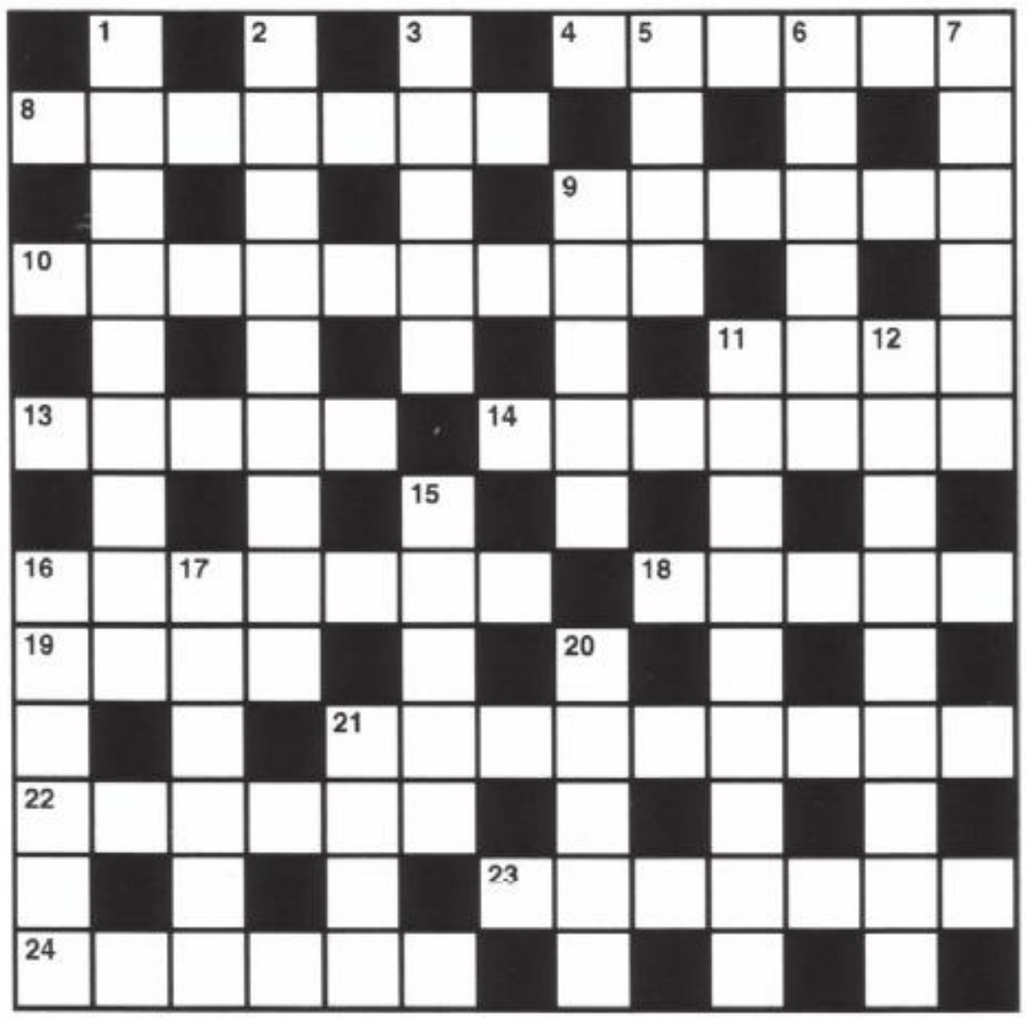
1 Geographical dictionary (9)
2 Expectations (9)
3 Blood-sucker (5)
5 Brink (4)
6 Small space of time (6)
7 Vagrants (6)
9 Coral island (5)
11 Pep pill (9)
12 Determine one's position (9)
15 Besom (5)
16 Capital city (6)
17 Conifers (6)
20 On the move (5)
21 Monk's room (4)

Cryptic Clues Across

4 Separate after the beginning of French leave? (6)
8 Ostentatious to mop up spilt soup (7)
9 Let man change in the mind (6)
10 Dramatic desire for city transport (6-3)
11 Was once a vegetable, it's said (4)
13 The old Englishman could be right (5)
14 Their work is certainly a grind (7)
16 Eaten up as ten different titbits (7)
18 A Spanish hero's likely to be sharp (5)
19 Produce a change of diet (4)
21 She'll put her money on an old sailor (9)
22 To be fastidious, put out the tin during the day (6)
23 Do they haunt the bar? (4)
24 Encouraging lays? (6)

Cryptic Clues Down

1 Foreshadowed an empty decanter? (9)
2 Pale plant has appeal (9)
3 Appropriate wear at the card table (5)
5 First lady has the right - always (4)
6 Former Prime Minister emerged from the battle, entirely unruffled (6)
7 Gnarled fingers lock among the shades (6)
9 Crazy to put the chap in charge (5)
11 The songster has the right to put in a dirty bid (9)
12 CID are up at the end to wipe out (9)
15 Likely to scratch? (5)
16 Tout one's wares - on foot? (6)
17 First class fish not in prime condition (6)
20 Overflow the eastern incline (5)
21 Shock could be the finish of 16 across (4)



Scribble space

Last week's solutions

8	6	4	5	3	9	1	2	7
5	2	7	6	4	1	3	8	9
1	3	9	7	8	2	4	6	5
7	5	8	2	9	4	6	3	1
2	9	3	1	6	5	8	7	4
6	4	1	3	7	8	5	9	2
4	8	2	9	5	6	7	1	3
3	1	6	4	2	7	9	5	8
9	7	5	8	1	3	2	4	6

2	7	4	6	9	5	1	8	3
6	8	1	2	4	3	5	7	9
9	5	3	8	1	7	6	4	2
5	9	7	3	6	2	4	1	8
1	6	2	7	8	4	3	9	5
3	4	8	1	5	9	7	2	6
4	1	9	5	2	6	8	3	7
8	3	5	9	7	1	2	6	4
7	2	6	4	3	8	9	5	1

8	9	6	5	1	2	7	3	4
5	3	4	7	6	8	1	9	2
7	1	2	9	4	3	8	6	5
4	5	8	1	9	6	2	7	3
9	2	1	3	7	4	5	8	6
6	7	3	8	2	5	4	1	9
2	8	7	6	5	9	3	4	1
1	4	9	2	3	7	6	5	8
3	6	5	4	8	1	9	2	7

Quick Crossword

Across: 4 Spread 8 Exclaim 10 Enclose 11 Along 12 Urged 13 Foreigner 16 Gangsters 19 Hears 20 Union 22 Cannons 23 Ellipse 24 Strike

Down: 1 Behalf 2 Echo 3 Laughing stock 5 Picturesquely 6 Elongate 7 Dreads 9 Melon 14 Retainer 15 Shocks 17 Nurse 18 Senses 21 Imps

Cryptic Crossword

Across: 4 Circle 8 Torrent 10 Enhance 11 Islam 12 Hoist 13 Telepathy 16 Repossess 19 Tango 20 Under 22 Peeling 23 Stunted 24 Ensued

Down: 1 Strict 2 Oral 3 Hermaphrodite 5 Ichthyosaurus 6 Canticle 7 Elects 9 Tenet 14 Launders 15 Staple 17 Pangs 18 Stride 21 Duty

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WIN an entry to the LA fitness Capital to Coast ride*

LA fitness Capital to Coast
Cycle Challenge for Charity

* plus win 6 months membership of your local LA fitness club to get in great shape!

RESERVE your place on the ultimate annual London to Brighton Bike ride, taking place on the 22nd June 2014.

Suitable for all ages and abilities, and actively encouraging those with disabilities to take part, LA fitness Capital to Coast includes a number of cyclists usually riding on tandem cycles with their supporters for the 75 and 60 mile ride down to the South Coast.

Join TV presenters and keen cyclists Jeff Brazier and Dr Dawn Harper and hundreds of other cyclists to raise money for three charities – Norwood, the Downs Syndrome Association and Action Medical Research.

There are four routes covering 75 or 60 miles, all finishing on Brighton beach.

Advance registration is just £30 and on the day at £35. Riders should aim to raise a minimum of £200 (or £100 for under 18s). www.capitaltocoast.org.uk.

Win an entry!

To celebrate LA fitness Capital to Coast cycle challenge, we've joined forces with LA fitness so that two lucky readers are entered in the challenge, and given a free membership to your local club to start training! The race itself is on 22nd June so you should be 'cycle ready' by then using the latest technogym equipment at LA fitness plus check out the LA Spin classes to really get your pedals going! You're membership is for six months so you get to continue the good work beyond the cycle challenge!

We're also spreading the love for all readers too with a free 3-day pass. Just download at www.lafitness.co.uk/fitness

Closing date:
Friday, June 13

Q: Where does the LA fitness Capital to Coast Cycle ride finish?

To enter more competitions like this, go online to www.oxfordjournal.co.uk

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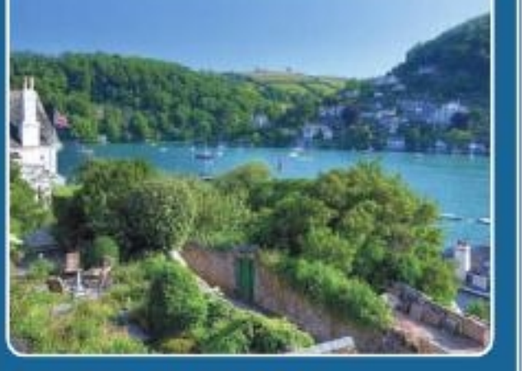

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Skoda still shining

IT is shaping up to be another good year for Skoda after they shone at a 2014 survey of car ownership satisfaction.

The What Car?/JD Power Survey, held in Milton Keynes last Thursday, placed the Czech Republic-based manufacturers fourth for the second year running in the car brand rankings.

The survey of car ownership satisfaction was taken from opinions of 15,000 motorists between January and March this year. It means that they have been in the top-10 car manufacturers for more than 20 years.

Alasdair Stewart, brand director for Skoda UK, said: "The JD Power survey is acknowledged throughout the automotive world as a benchmark standard for customer satisfaction.

"For Skoda to have been in the top-10 for over 20 years is outstanding, and tribute to the hard work of everyone associated with the brand."

Winner of the overall car survey out of 109 ranked cars was the Volkswagen Up! named top among owners, followed by the Volkswagen Golf Plus.

REVIEW: Skoda Superb
By **James Richings**

The Skoda Superb had been 2013's winner.

Third was Skoda's Yeti, slipping one place since 2013.

The compact SUV took the overall title in the SUV category.

The judges said: "Owners like the spacious cabin and that they can get in and out of it easily.

"The raised driving height and large windows mean that the driver's view of the road is very good too."

To round off a good year for Skoda, the Octavia came seventh overall, with the Superb in 15th position.

The Skoda Superb was 2013's winner followed by the Skoda Yeti.

The rankings are judged by thousands of car owners with results published in next month's What Car? magazine.

• *The Skoda Superb was among the car manufacturer's top-20 entries in a recent survey*

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Official fuel consumption in mpg (litres/100km) for the ŠKODA Rapid Sport 1.2 TSI 105PS: Urban 40.9 (6.9), Extra Urban 61.4 (4.6), Combined 52.3 (5.4). CO2 emissions for the ŠKODA Rapid Sport 1.2 TSI 105PS 1.2 TSI 86PS: 125g/km. Standard EU test figures for comparative purposes and may not reflect real driving results.

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Fuel consumption figures in mpg (l/100km) for the range of Kia models shown are: Urban 31.0 (9.1) – 47.1 (6.0), Extra Urban 46.3 (6.1) – 58.9 (4.8), Combined 39.2 (7.2) – 54.3 (5.2). CO2 emissions are 189 – 135g/km.

MPG figures are official EU test figures for comparative purposes and may not reflect real driving results. 7 year /100,000 mile manufacturer's warranty. For terms, conditions and exclusions visit kia.co.uk or see your local dealer. Price, Reevoo score and number of reviews correct at time of going to press and specification is subject to change without notice. Models shown: 2014 Sportage '1' 1.6 GDI 133bhp 6-speed manual @ £17,500 On The Road (OTR) excluding metallic paint at £510; Sorento 'KX-1' 2.2 CRDI 194bhp 6-speed manual 7 seat @ £24,700 including customer saving of £2,000 and excluding optional metallic paint at £550 OTR price includes VAT, number plates, delivery, 12 months' Government Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) and Vehicle First Registration Fee. Retail customers only. Subject to availability on vehicles registered before 30 June 2014. *4.9% APR available on Kia Conditional Sale and Kia Access on all Sportage and Sorento models. 10% minimum deposit required. Maximum term of 36 months. Offer not available in conjunction with any other offer. Finance subject to status. Terms and conditions apply. 18's or over. Guarantees / indemnities may be required. Kia Motors Finance RH1 1SR. We can introduce you to a limited number of carefully selected finance providers. We may receive a commission from them for the introduction. Customer savings vary by model derivative.

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Mirage range fuel consumption in mpg (ltrs/100km): Urban 56.5 – 61.4 (5.0 – 4.6), Extra Urban 72.4 – 78.5 (3.9 – 3.6), Combined 65.7 – 68.9 (4.3 – 4.1), CO2 Emissions 100 – 95g/km.

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2003 03 Ford Fusion 1.4 Fusion 3 5dr Petrol Semi-Automatic 45860 Miles £2,995
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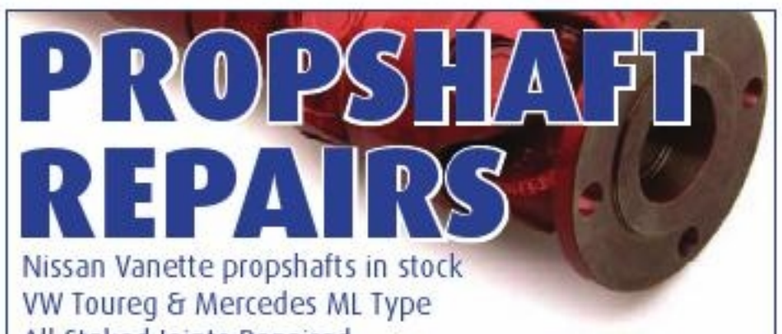

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Dominant Welsh ready for Bristol showdown

LAST week's gripping London Welsh win at the Kassam puts the Dragons tantalisingly close to regaining their Premiership spot.

By **Katriona Ormiston**

katriona@taylornewspapers.co.uk

The convincing 27-8 victory gave them a 19-point lead for their Bristol match last night to fight for their place in the top Premiership league.

The sell-out match at Bristol's Memorial Stadium got underway last night at 7.45pm as the Journal went to print.

The first leg against Bristol last week in the Championship play-off final saw tries from Nathan Trevett, Nick Scott and Carl Kirwan, each converted by top kicking from Gordon Ross.

Two penalties gave them the 19-point advantage on aggregate.

But the job is not done until the second leg is over, London Welsh boss Justin Burnell insisted.

"We will be going there with the mind-set that we have to win the game," the head coach said.

"That will be our focus; we've got to go and win the game.

"We've still got a long way to go – there's another leg to play. We know how good Bristol are – they're capable of scoring points.

"We're happy with the three tries and 19 points. Is 19 points enough? I'd rather be 19 points up than 19 points down."

The match drew in crowds of more than 5,000 for the evening showdown.

Bristol had a bad night with an ankle injury for former Wales captain Ryan Jones, who was newly recruited into the side this month.

Jones' fall from a line-out put him out of the match 28 minutes in.

Burnell added: "In hindsight we should be going there 26 points [up] – I honestly thought Nick Scott was under the posts. But at least we're in the right areas.

"It's all about next week and the preparation for us.

"We're a pretty bunch and we don't roll over. We saw that in respect to Leeds in the semi-final. Thirteen points down we were dead and buried and everyone wrote us off.

"That's one thing we have got - spirit. Aside from the 19 points, we'll also be taking a lot of spirit with us [into the second leg]."

London Welsh were relegated last season so Dragons are fighting for a quick return to Premiership rugby.

For the full results and report of last night's match, go to oxfordjournal.co.uk.

Corker wants landmark match in Premiership

LONDON Welsh Club Captain Matt Corker stepped onto the field of Bristol's Memorial Stadium last night in his 199th match for the Dragons.

The Welsh second row said he hopes his 200th will be in the Premiership.

He joined team mates on the pitch as the second and last leg of the Championship finals kicked off at 7.45pm as the Journal went to print.

Corker is the club's longest serving player, having joined the Dragons in 2007.

He said: "Most definitely, I'd want to play it in the Premiership.

"I feel very lucky to have played so many games and I'm proud to be part of a fantastic club.

"But we can't get ahead of ourselves, we are playing a very good team.

"As a player you get quite disciplined focusing on the game ahead and not what could be.

"We have had a good week of preparation although at this stage."

The 31-year-old said it spurred the team on have the strength of support they had from the crowds last week.

He added: "This was our second season in the Kassam and it was fantastic.

"To have that kind of support on a rainy and windy evening really made a difference.

"The Kassam has felt like home for a while now."

London Welsh made four changes for last night's match.

In the backs, Alan Awcock started at full back with Seb Stegmann moving to the right wing. Rhys Crane is named among the replacements.

In the forwards, Mitch Lees returned to the side at blindside flanker to make his first appearance since Welsh's win over Jersey on April 12.

Richard Thorpe starts at Number 8.

• Matt Corker is ready for a return to the Premiership next season (Picture by Martin John)

Saints' fourth win in a row

OXFORD Saints kept their unbeaten start to the season going, with a 34-14 victory against Peterborough Saxons.

Both sides had won their opening three fixtures going into Sunday's match, being played at Abingdon Rugby Club.

Saints' running back Jonny Dover opened the scoring with a two-yard run, before Spencer Duffy kicked the conversion for a 7-0 lead.

It was soon 14-0 as Saints took advantage of big holes in the Saxons' defensive line, with running back James Ferrigno scoring a touchdown and Duffy again kicking the extras.

The second quarter saw Saxons get back into the game with a touchdown and conversion of their own.

But Saints pulled clear again as Stephen Bentley scored on a four-yard run, although Duffy this time missed the conversion to make the score 20-7.

Peterborough again responded and the score was 20-14 at half-time, but that would be it for the visitors as their offence was shut out for the rest of the game.

Bentley scored another touchdown and ran in the conversion, before Ferrigno added another for a final 34-14 scoreline.

Saints will hope to keep their winning run going when they host Shropshire Revolution in Abingdon on Sunday.

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Oxford's first pro dies aged 88

TRIBUTES FOR JACK, U'S HERO FOR OVER 50 YEARS

THE first ever professional footballer to be signed by Oxford United has died at the age of 88.

By **Adam Flinn**

adam@taylornewspapers.co.uk

Jack Casley passed away at the weekend after battling illness for the last few years.

He was the first professional player to be signed for the club, known as Headington United at the time, in 1949. He joined Oxford United from his home town side Torquay United.

After playing his first game in goal, he then scored a hat-trick in his second as a centre forward. He retired as a first-team player in 1951.

But Jack stayed closely involved with the U's and became chief scout. He and was instrumental in bringing local youngsters Kevin Brock and Andy Thomas to the club.

Midfielder Brock went on to make almost 250 appearances with Oxford and scored 26 goals, while forward Thomas scored 32 goals in 116 appearances in the 1980s.

Jack travelled thousands of miles for the club in the role, before stepping down in 2002 after 53 years.

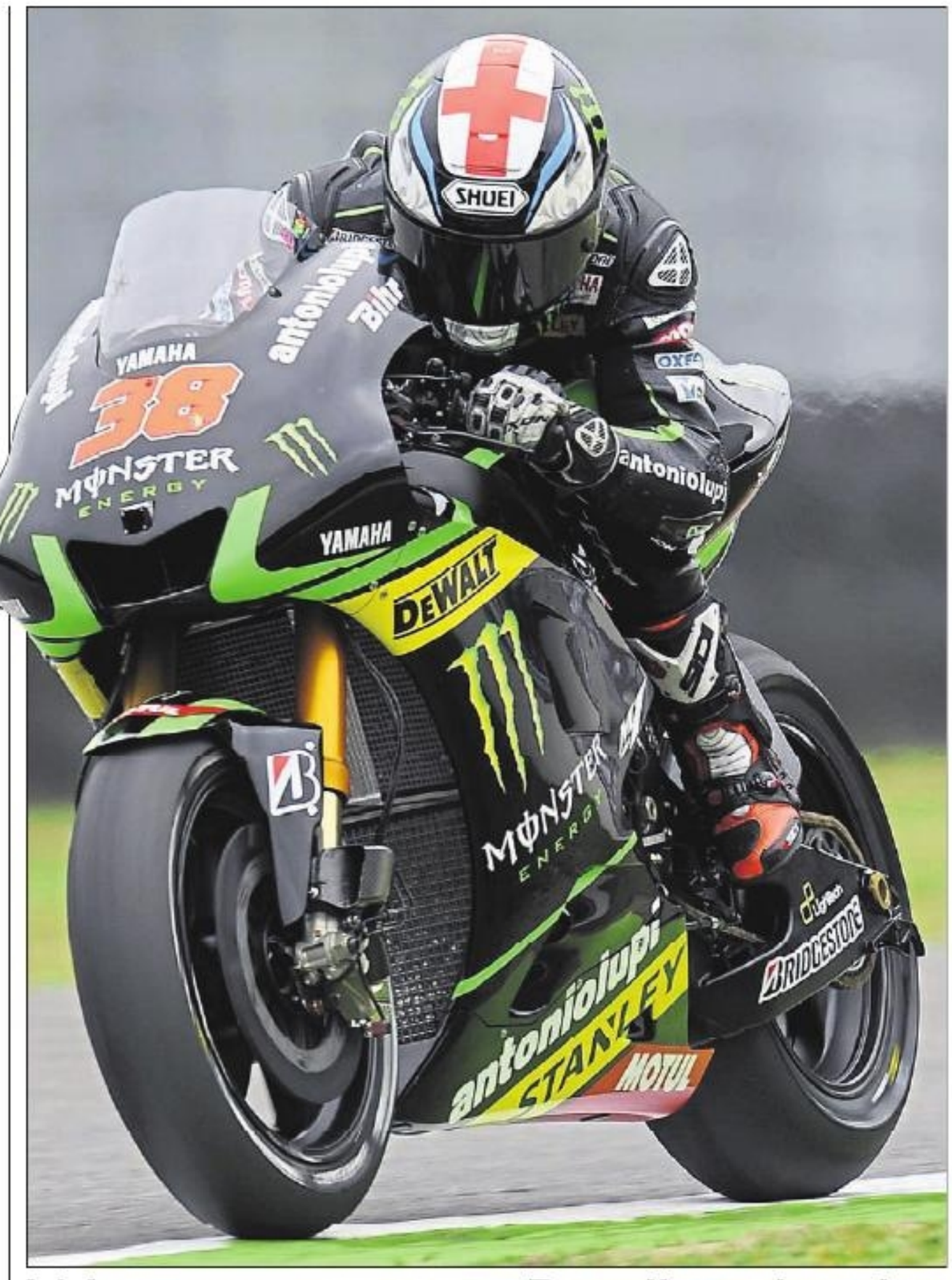
Former U's winger Peter Rhoades-Brown paid tribute to Jack on behalf of Oxford United on Monday.

He said: "Jack was a big part of the club for over 50 years. He had such a knowledge of the game and liked nothing better than to sit and talk football with us.

"Most weekends he was out there watching junior games in the morning and then off to another game in the afternoon. He never tired of it, or lost his enthusiasm.

"He has fought bravely against illness in the last couple of years, and will be missed by us all."

• *Jack Casley*



Wrong tyres cost Bradley dearly

A PROMISING weekend ended in disappointment for MotoGP rider Bradley Smith, as he came off his bike after just three laps of the Italian Grand Prix at Mugello on Sunday.

Smith had qualified seventh on the soft tyre, but hotter conditions on race day meant he started on the harder option.

He had only done limited laps on the hard tyre, and the Oxford-born rider made a mistake only a few laps in at turn eight, ending his race with the fall.

"I much preferred the soft option, but as the track conditions were quite hot today, we were recommended to use the hard tyre like everyone else," said Smith.

"Unfortunately I'm not used to that tyre on this track, and I felt it didn't work with my riding style.

"The front tucked in at turn eight but in all honesty there wasn't much I could do about it.

"It's very frustrating as I had the race pace to get a really good result, but from the first lap I could feel that things weren't going to plan."

Smith is currently 10th in the championship standings with 34 points, 116 behind the unbeaten Honda of Marc Marquez, who took his sixth win out of six in Italy.

The next race is held at the Spanish circuit of Catalunya on June 15.

• ***Bradley Smith only completed three laps at Mugello (Picture courtesy of Tech 3)***

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